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The UFO Diaries

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The UFO Diaries

Travels in the Weird World of High Strangeness

Martin Plowman

ARENA
ALLEN&UNWIN

First published in 2011

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Arena Books, an imprint of
Allen & Unwin
83 Alexander Street
Crows Nest NSW 2065
Australia
Phone: (61 2) 8425 0100
Fax: (61 2) 9906 2218
Email: info@allenandunwin.com
Web: www.allenandunwin.com

Cataloguing-in-Publication details are available
from the National Library of Australia
www.trove.nla.gov.au

ISBN 978 1 74175 981 5

Maps by Ian Faulkner
Set in 12/14 pt Requiem by Bookhouse, Sydney
Printed in Australia by Griffin Press

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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For Priscilla Jane and my family

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Prologue

MY LIFE AS A UFOLOGY-OLOGIST

I never thought I'd grow up to be a grave robber. It may well be the world's third oldest profession after politics and you-know-what, and I hear the pay is good as long as you don't mind working with a bunch of stiffs, but grave robbing just doesn't have the romantic appeal of, say, arms dealer, nor the dinner party cachet of Peace Corps volunteer. *What did you do in Peru, Martin?* people would ask me back home, and I would have to say something like, 'I trespassed upon the burial grounds of civilisations that were old before the country I was born in even existed.' Unfortunately my camera would be stolen on a bus exactly two days later as I left the plateau of Marcahuasi to return to Lima, Peru's smog-bound capital, so I don't even have the photos to prove my guilt.

Mercifully, the tomb was empty. All that remained were the dry-mortared stonewalls perhaps five feet in height, with a tiny square entrance on one side through which the shrunken, mummified corpse of the ancient lord would've been interred. I breathed a sigh of relief. There was nothing to disturb here; any remains once laid to rest in the tomb had been stolen or removed many years ago, and I was just a visitor en route to my own eventual destination.

Besides, I had not come here for buried treasure – for months now I had been travelling through South America in search of UFO stories. In total I spent no less than four hundred and twenty-two hours sitting on buses and other wheeled transport in South America (excluding ox-carts and inline skates), a tally I began keeping after one especially murderous eighteen-hour bus journey over a road in lowland Bolivia so rutted and corrugated that my kidneys ached for days afterwards as if kicked by a territorially challenged llama.

My UFO witnesses were the folk I met waiting in bus terminals, or villagers buying potatoes in the marketplace, or fellow travellers with a story to tell, and I encountered them all across the teeming cities, trackless jungles and *soroche*-inducing mountains of this vast continent. Ever since arriving in South America I'd been hearing that Marcahuasi, an archetypal lost world soaring some four thousand metres above sea level, was one of the continent's major UFO hot spots. After a tiring day's journey from Lima I was finally here, about to violate an ancient Andean lord's burial ground . . . but I've already said that. I stood up now to gain a better view of my surroundings and, less hopefully, see a UFO.

The things you do in search of truth. Thing is, I don't really believe in a solid, grab-it-by-the-ears-and-lock-it-in-a-cage kind of 'Truth' – which was why I was attracted to the idea of UFOs in the first place, for these unnameable little objects whose fragile existence is debatable at the best of times compel people to take the strangest of journeys.

My own journey into the world of high strangeness began in Australia, a country so distant from Peru as to be considered semi-mythical. *Australia?* these descendants of the vanquished but not forgotten Incas would ask quizzically, frowning beneath their alpaca wool caps or bowler hats. *What language do they speak*

in Australia? The irreconcilable fact that I could converse in heavily accented Spanish (sometimes more fluently than these Quechua-speaking highlanders, for whom the tongue of Cervantes and Lorca was often a distant second language) led many of the people I met throughout the isolated valleys of the Andes to conclude that Australia must be some far-flung former colony of the Spanish empire, just as Peru itself had once been.

The chain of events that brought me to the other side of the world stretched back to the southern winter of 1999, when I made the fateful decision to undertake a PhD at my antipodean-Gothic alma mater, Melbourne University – largely as a means to retaining a heated office on campus, truth be told. My research subject was what might be considered 'niche,' in the same sense that an incurably mad professor might be bricked up in their office: I would write a comprehensive history of the belief in UFOs, as seen through the eyes of the world's true believers.

Ufologists, these cardigan-clad seekers of proof of the existence of extraterrestrial life are called. Me, I'm not a ufologist myself, but I am fascinated by *their* fascination with UFOs. Perhaps a little too fascinated for my own good, although I doubt I was ever in danger of going fully native in a subculture where paranoia is considered an attractive personality trait and binoculars the very height of fashion. I never set out to discover the Truth; I never wanted to believe. Honestly. But I did walk in the footsteps of ufologists, a sinuous and broken trail, glowing with the light of other worlds, that I would follow for seven long years.

So let me say from the outset: I have never seen a UFO. To the best of my knowledge, I have not been abducted by aliens. I cannot communicate telepathically, and I was definitely born on this planet (as were my parents – I think). If you are looking for *answers*, talk to a priest or a psychologist, for you will not find them in this book.

Despite all that, when I meet a person who tells me they've seen something in the sky they can't explain, I tend to believe them. The world is a big place, and the cosmos even larger and stranger than we can yet imagine. This book is not about belief or disbelief; it's about chasing the stories of wonder human beings tell each other and seeing where they lead.

Some years ago now, I was at a party when word got around that I was writing a PhD on UFOs. I don't recall telling people about my research, but somehow the news always seemed to move through conversations on its own accord, as it still does today. At any rate, the three people who lived in that house got wind of the situation and called me upstairs to answer some questions.

We sat cross-legged on the floor, the three housemates facing me in a semicircle. I felt like I was going for a house interview. Should I tell them I owned a fridge? A slow-burning fuse of a joint was passed around the assembly, but manfully I refused, for I knew I would need all my wits about me.

'We hear you're writing a thesis about UFOs,' said the first of the trio. I nodded.

'Does that mean you believe in UFOs?' asked the second housemate. I shook my head. I was more interested in how people attempted to make sense of UFO sightings, I said. The housemates exchanged sceptical glances.

'Now just wait a minute here!' the third housemate almost shouted, voice rising in sceptical indignation. 'I have to ask: how the *hell* were you allowed to take a topic like that?' This last question was more an exclamation of disbelief, and he stabbed his fingers in the air before my nose for effect.

So I told them. I spoke at length and with great rhetorical dexterity about the sheer inventive strangeness of UFO sightings, about how ufologists must truly belong to one of the most enduring subcultures of the past century, how there was a word

for 'UFO' in almost every language, and that it was my job to pull this colourful but threadbare tapestry of belief into some kind of overarching story. There was silence among the assembled guests.

The third member of the panel looked at me unsteadily, jazz cigarette smouldering lightly in his fingers. His eyes became unfocused for a moment, then appeared to see something behind me. Behind me! No, he was looking at me all right, just from someplace else.

'So if you're studying ufology,' he ventured, choosing his words with the extreme care of a politician or the very stoned (or a very stoned politician), 'if you're studying ufology but you're not a ufologist, does that make you a "ufology-ologist"?'

I was stunned. He was right, damn right – for that is exactly what I am.

I am not a ufologist, but I am a ufology-ologist, and proud of it. I do not believe in the theories of ufologists, even if I find the stories they tell fascinating. I do believe in fairies, and in the bogeyman, and in the power of love, and that despite our best efforts science may never be able to conclusively explain everything. But belief must be tempered by curiosity, and it has been the latter that for more than seven years permitted me to peer over the edge of the unknown without falling into its darkness. And until I find myself in a strange room surrounded by little grey people with the clear intent of administering an anal probe, that's where I will stand.

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1

MELBOURNE:
UFOS DO NOT EXIST, BUT THEY ARE REAL

I was four years old when I first heard about UFOs. I was in hospital recovering from open heart surgery, and the idea that at that very moment, as I lay in my steel-framed hospital cot hooked up to the tubes and monitors of life support, somewhere out there among the stars intelligent beings might be observing our plight on Earth thrilled me beyond words.

But like a lot of children at that age, my first love for strange and unbelievable things was for dinosaurs. It simply astounded me that creatures many times larger than my father's battered Peugeot once lived and fought and *ate each other* in the same space where we humans now dwelt. My parents had bought me a set of plastic dinosaur figurines, the kind with 'Made in Taiwan' stamped on their scaly underbellies, and I refused to be parted from them. Despite fears that a stegosaurus might get stuck in my windpipe before I could even reach the operating theatre, the medical staff relented and allowed me to bring the little creatures into the ward. Perhaps they felt they were indulging a gravely ill child, but I like to think these medicos simply recognised the budding germ of a young nerd and decided to let it multiply freely rather than coolly inoculating it when they had the chance.

'What's this one called?' a doctor asked one day, pointing to a snarling three-inch-long monstrosity, bone-crunching jaws agape and stunted forelimbs curled in ecstatic anticipation of ripping apart some soft-bellied, leaf-munching ruminant.

'That's Tyrannosaurus rex,' I replied, holding the plastic beastie up for consideration.

'He looks *verrry* dangerous,' the doctor purred. Even at that tender age I knew when I was being patronised.

'Its name means "king of the tyrant lizards" and it was the biggest carnivore that ever lived,' I shot back primly. The doctor looked impressed.

'*Tyrannosaurus rex*,' he mused, rolling the word around his mouth in the way he might've told my parents, 'Your son has the condition we cardiologists like to call a *tetralogy of Fallot*.' He smiled genially. 'That's a big word for a little man.' I'd just about had enough of this intellectual sparring, so I riposted with a withering, 'Yes, it is' and left it at that.

After the surgery I was too weak to play with my cherished dinosaurs. Instead, my parents read to me from books about dinosaurs. While other children my age were dealing with the complexities of *Run, Spot, Run*, I was listening avidly to the nesting habits of the diplodocus. This being more than thirty years ago now, most of what science thought it knew about dinosaurs has changed; many of those great saurians have since been revealed to be warm-blooded, covered in feathers or, worse still, no longer exist due to errors in species classification. I now know that science is being revised constantly, and that such mistakes are what makes the scientist's challenge to discover new things exciting. As a child, though, such circumspection had not yet descended upon me, and I devoured the accounts of lumbering, reptilian giants with as much wide-eyed wonder as if they'd been fairy tales.

One evening as I lay in the recovery ward, my mother and father arrived with a bulging parcel of new books. Little did they know that I was about to be dealt a stroke of fate with far-reaching consequences that no one then could possibly have foreseen.

Eagerly, I flipped through the books. Beneath the first title was another book on dinosaurs, but underneath that I found something completely different. I remember the cover distinctly, for indeed I still own the book. *The World of the Unknown*, the series title read, and below that in larger red letters that seared themselves into my young and impressionable mind: *UFOs*. Beneath this mysterious acronym an ochre-skinned creature with impossibly huge eyes stared impassively up at me. Its gaze gave nothing away.

My parents exchanged nervous glances as I held this new and wondrous book in my trembling hands. Perhaps they were right to be worried.

One picture in particular grabbed my attention. 'A UFO seen hovering over Melbourne, Australia, in 1956,' the caption read. My heart, only recently repaired, raced faster in my chest. Melbourne, Australia – that's where I lived! I looked more closely at the picture of the UFO, which resembled nothing more than a steam iron. Yet in 1956, the same year the Olympics were held in Melbourne, this strange object had hovered silently over the Yarra River and terrified dozens of people before whizzing off into the distance.

I fixed the UFO's description in my mind ('flying iron, cordless') and asked the director of nursing to be transferred to a window-side bed. Well, no, I didn't really – I was only four years old – but as it happened the next day I was moved to a window bed that gave me an uninterrupted view across the office towers of central Melbourne. Dinosaurs forgotten, my vigil began: for several hours each day while I lay convalescing in bed I scanned the skies for signs of the Flying Iron's return.

My silence and inactivity began to worry the nursing staff. 'Are you not feeling well, dearie?' one of the charge sisters finally asked.

Without taking my eyes off the sky, I replied, 'No, I'm OK. I'm just looking for UFOs.' Somehow this answer seemed to satisfy everyone that I was on to the road to recovery, and I was pretty much left alone after that.

Sometimes when I recount this story to people they tell me that maybe wanting to believe in flying saucers so badly was a way of taking my mind off being in hospital. Actually I don't remember being in much pain, but I've surely got morphine to thank for that – which, although it severely distorted my sense of reality, sadly didn't conjure up any flying saucers from thin air. I'm happy to concede that entertaining the existence of alien worlds may have provided some measure of escapism, but I think the real reason why UFOs captured my imagination so completely was just that I've always been fond of weird stuff.

To my extreme disappointment, when I was finally discharged from hospital with a second chance at life I still hadn't seen my UFO. Looking back now, I think that was the one and only time in my life when I really, *really* wanted to believe in UFOs.

In the years that followed, flying saucers drifted out of my consciousness as I wilfully wasted my teenage years reading science fiction novels and playing Dungeons & Dragons when I should've been hanging out in shopping malls smoking cigarettes and talking to girls.

UFOs weren't to feature strongly again in my life until I was nearing the end of my undergraduate studies. In those days I lived in a succession of share houses around the campus of Melbourne University, a sprawling Gormenghast of a place seemingly founded on the architectural principle that nothing exceeds like excess. Back then I was always in desperate need of a haircut; I wore clothes passed down by friends, family and

charitable well-wishers, and what little money I had I spent on coffee, books and rent (in that order).

Although my true calling was always writing, upon arriving fresh and unformed at the gates of higher learning I couldn't bring myself to leave behind the rarefied thrills of laboratory work. So I'd enrolled in a physics major, as well as cultural studies in the humanities. Sure, many of the friends I made in physics would rather calculate the quantum wave function for Schrödinger's undernourished cat than hang out at the mall and smoke cigarettes, but they also played in jazz and funk bands and lived in crumbling nineteenth-century Victorian-era terrace houses that ringed the campus like barnacles on a scuppered ship. Discovering the inner city and all its magic places felt like an act of discovery, and we claimed it for ourselves in the name of adventure and untrammelled joy.

Although I couldn't play a musical instrument to save the Dalai Lama, I found that my ready ability to talk with absolute and unflagging exuberance on anything from postcolonial reforms in the Upper Milwaukee to single-body chronosynclastic collision systems earned me a welcome place in the circle. It seemed only natural that I would continue my nerd odyssey and apply to do a PhD. But the question remained: in what?

It was a typical night for us: my friend Asco's funk band had played at a local pub and we'd headed back to his house afterwards.

At that time Asco lived in Richmond, a suburb noted by all for the quantity of its Vietnamese restaurants and the quality of its junkies. A lull in the party found me in a dark corner of the main living area, next to a large wooden bookcase full of what seemed the usual selection of thrift store second-hand books. With no better prospects for conversation in sight, I peered in closer to make out the titles in the dim light.

Unhuman Intelligences, the first read. Something to do with AI programming, maybe. The cover illustration seemed unusual, however, for such a technical topic: a demonic-looking creature caught mid-snarl, part werewolf, part pangolin. It was, I realised, *The Ghost of a Flea*, a nineteenth-century engraving by the visionary English poet and artist William Blake.

The Mothman Prophecies, the second book was called, by John A. Keel, an author I'd never heard of at the time. A winged humanoid creature dominated the elaborate cover art, its flame-red eyes lighting up the fantastic composition. Two metallic, disc-shaped aircraft hovered in the sky behind the monstrous figure.

The third book I picked up was *Flying Saucers Have Landed*. If this were true (as the title suggested), I had to ask myself: how could I have missed such important news?

It was just dawning on me that these were not physics textbooks when Asco appeared, drink in hand.

'Ah,' he said with a sheepish smile, 'you've found my UFO books.' I nodded, but before I could say anything he pushed on. 'It's not that I actually believe in UFOs, you know,' Asco said quietly, a light frown clouding his cherubic features. 'More like a little hobby, really.'

I waved away his explanations. 'I just had no idea the UFO thing was so big,' I said. 'When I was a kid I was sure it was only me who thought UFOs were interesting.'

'Yeah, me too,' Asco agreed, visibly brightening. 'But it's huge, man. Ufology's a whole other world, with different schools of thoughts and movements, just like a parallel science.'

My interest was piqued. Curiosity never just killed the cat outright; first it swung it by the tail. 'What did you just call it, this UFO subculture?' I asked. '*Euphomology*?'

'No, *ufology*,' Asco replied, pronouncing it 'YOU-fology'.

I chose a book at random and started reading the first page. 'The first UFO sighting of the modern era was reported by pilot Kenneth Arnold on June 24, 1947,' it began, and all the childhood enthusiasm I once had for UFOs came flowing back. I reckon it was there and then, in a poorly heated terrace house in downtrodden Richmond, that the next seven years of my life were set in motion.

The next morning when I awoke bleary-eyed and cotton-mouthed on Asco's couch, I realised I had two things in mind that were not there the day before. Item one: a hangover of Wagnerian proportions, the kind where fifteen hefty women in pigtails and winged helmets rattle spears while singing and tap-dancing their way through the flames of a funeral pyre; and item two, a research proposal, finally.

The remainder of my undergraduate days passed quickly. I worked *bloody* hard. When my final marks came in I was both relieved and elated to find that they were high enough for me to be accepted into the cultural studies PhD program.

My primary PhD supervisor, the department notified me, was a mild-mannered fellow in his early forties called Ken Geldof. I remember thinking when I first met Ken that he fitted my picture of the inner-city academic perfectly: bespectacled and favouring earthy-coloured suede and corduroy, he would often be seen cycling to work, books slung over one shoulder in a hessian satchel. 'What a jolly fellow,' I thought.

Oh dear; oh deary, deary me. The burning shame I now feel at such naïveté. Ken was all these things, but no absent-minded professor out of a J.K. Rowling or Philip Pullman novel was he. His nickname of 'Gentle Ken', I soon discovered, worked in much the way a very large person might be called 'Tiny', a

right-handed person 'Lefty', and an intercontinental nuclear missile 'The Peacemaker'.

Every morning, I imagined, Ken came to his office bright and early and reverentially took out his gleaming vorpal blade of critical incision. A razor-sharp katana forged from the finest poststructuralist steel, this was Ken's weapon of choice. His personal motto, *Ne dítez pas la merde*, ran down the blade's edge, etched in flowing script that shifted into a blur as he began his daily fencing exercises. Feints and jabs, ripostes and counter-ripostes, Ken's sword cut through the empty space of his office. This was the role he was made for, the wielder of this finely balanced but terrifying instrument, a blade so sharp it cut through the illusions that obscure our true vision of the world like so much rank scum floating on a cesspit.

Going up to Ken's office always felt like I was entering the ring. '*Banzaí!*' he would shriek as I opened the door, leaping at me with his blade of critical incision raised high in a two-handed grip. Unarmed, I could only hold up the pages of my slowly developing manuscript to ward off the flurry of blows. *Snickety-snack!* went Ken's vorpal blade, the shredded pages falling like so much confetti, until finally I would be left holding the barest scrap of paper. 'I think you may have something here, Martin,' he'd say, pointing to the pitifully small fragment of manuscript.

My second supervisor was called Peter Octavian. With his high patrician forehead and wispy halo of sandy hair, he wouldn't have looked out of place in a frock coat and cape, drinking fortified wine with Shelley or racing Byron across the Hellespont for a lark. Thankfully, Peter resisted the temptation of indulging in the kind of highbrow cos-play peculiar to so many academics (Jane Austen scholars are always the worst). When I picture Peter in my mind, I always see him in a neatly cut leather jacket and blue jeans.

If Ken was a taskmaster of almost Zen-like inscrutability, Peter favoured a gentler, more conversational style of supervision. And yet, although Peter might not have been as frank as Ken in his appraisal of my progress (or lack thereof, as was so often the case), his criticisms matched almost exactly those of Ken. It was as if the two of them had deliberately adopted the good cop/bad cop approach in an effort to get me writing something that made sense . . . I can imagine Ken and Peter retiring to the members-only University House to discuss their supervision strategy for that irksome Plowman student. 'I don't want to be too hard on him, Peter,' Ken would say reluctantly, unable to meet the taller man's eye. 'If I keep pushing him I might break the boy.' But Peter would never stand for a display of weakness in his colleague. 'I thought we had an agreement, Ken,' he would say, quietly, casually, but all the while fixing Ken with a steely nine-inch stare. Under that gaze Ken falters. He stutters with uncertainty. 'I, I don't know, it's just so hard to be *strong* and commanding all the time, you know, I'm n-not Master Yoda b-by nature . . . ,' but before he can finish Peter's hand has lashed out whip-fast and slapped Ken across the cheek. 'Get a hold of yourself, man!' he hisses, and the clubhouse is suddenly silent, academics and senior administrative staff peering nervously over their shoulders at the scene playing itself out at the bar. Peter steps in and gathers the now blubbering associate professor into his arms. 'There, there,' he murmurs soothingly, 'everything's going to be alright. I know it's hard, but we're doing this for Plowman's own good. We've both got to be strong for him, you and I, even if it takes seven years or more.'

Finally, some six months or so after I began work on my thesis, Ken summonsed me to a meeting. His office was hidden somewhere in the twin towers of the Gatehouse Building that guarded the southern approach to the campus. I could never

remember which tower exactly – for the next seven years I would habitually climb the wrong set of stairs to knock on the wrong door of the wrong office before realising I was in the wrong tower altogether.

'It's a beautiful day outside, Martin,' Ken said when I finally arrived, out of breath. 'Shall we walk?' Getting out of Ken's office seemed a good idea – I always felt slightly uncomfortable in there, as if somebody were behind us, monitoring our conversation . . . A quick glance over my shoulder confirmed this was true – a life-size cardboard cut-out of Buffy the Vampire Slayer staked a claim in the corner of the room, a teaching aid left over from Ken's first year course *Introducing the Vampire*. Cardboard or not, Buffy's presence never failed to put me slightly on edge, and I've not been able to watch a Sarah Michelle Gellar film since.

We began walking. 'So, Martin,' Ken said, 'to your thesis. Tell me how your literature review is progressing.'

My basic idea at that point was that the more UFO sightings were repressed or, as sceptics would say, 'debunked,' the more people wanted to believe in them. Carl Jung, the famous Swiss psychoanalyst, had said something like this way back in 1959 in his final book, *Flying Saucers: A Modern Myth of Things Seen in the Skies*. I related this to Ken now.

He listened carefully, before shaking his head. 'Jung isn't used much anymore in our field,' he commented, thus consigning the Swiss mystic to the bottom of my bookshelf for the rest of the project. 'And besides,' he continued, 'from what you've told me, UFO sightings are hardly repressed.'

Ken stared at me mildly for a moment, before gesturing for us to continue on our way. I followed, taking his silence as a sign to keep discoursing. 'I suppose what interests me about UFO sightings,' I began again, willing myself to come up with a response in the act of saying it, 'is not whether UFOs are real

or not. I mean, for UFO witnesses it's more a question of "What the hell was that?" and less "I wonder what kind of interstellar drive they're using?" I want to talk about that central paradox in ufology, whereby UFOs come to mean so much exactly *because* they can't be understood.'

'That sounds like a start, Martin,' Ken conceded. We'd now reached our destination, and after queuing up for our orders amidst the general din of the student-filled café, we began the slow amble back to Ken's office.

'Martin, have you ever read Jacques Lacan? I suppose you must have,' Ken asked.

Lacan, I knew, was considered the most important philosopher of psychoanalysis after Freud himself. Since his death in 1982 he'd become something of a hero in academic circles, although a practising psychiatrist once told me 'I avoid Lacan like hysteria itself – his so-called logic makes my patients' dreams seem like nursery rhymes in comparison.'

'I did an undergrad subject on Lacan,' I told Ken cautiously. 'But I didn't understand it very well,' I added.

Ken nodded. 'Well, Lacan *was* an iconoclast, you know,' he said with characteristic conciseness. 'He loved nothing more than confusing his opponents with complicated wordplay and impenetrable jokes that only made sense to him and a handful of followers. But Lacan was no simple *poseur* either,' and he raised a hand as if to quell protests from an unseen lecture hall.

'Lacan's great leap forward was to propose that the human condition only truly starts from the moment we enter language. You see, humans are not born with language. Without words to name things, the newborn child experiences the world as one undivided, complete whole. It's only when a child realises that words stand in for the things they want – milk, food, Mummy, and so on – that he or she is faced with the awful truth that

language actually *gets in the way* of reality. So words are in fact a two-edged sword. Through them we can communicate, but words also dismember the world into fragments that we can never put back together again. When we enter language we lose a part of reality.'

'But what's Lacan got to do with UFOs?' I interrupted. 'Do you think I should psychoanalyse UFO witnesses?'

'Certainly not,' Ken chuckled. 'I'm not sure what you may find. And I'm getting to the UFOs,' he added.

'Lacan soon began to see that there was another, deeper problem with words. He came to the conclusion that there was a fundamental barrier between that which can exist in language, and that which escapes it. He called these two divided parts of reality the symbolic and the real.

'So we're in the symbolic right now,' Ken declared after a pause. 'But the symbolic is not made up of words alone. There's a multitude of unspoken signs that surround us, from the way people dress,' (I looked at Ken's professorial suede jacket and pants, then glanced down at my torn jeans and baggy T-shirt), 'to the understanding that pedestrians only cross the road when the flashing man turns green. The symbolic is all around us. And yet it isn't really there. We might feel the symbolic is "real" and solid, but that little flashing green man isn't actually you, it just *represents* you. Words, language, signs – none are as real the things they represent.

'On the other hand, we feel the presence of the real when we encounter something that shatters the illusion of normal reality,' Ken continued. 'The detonation of the atomic bomb, the planes flying into the World Trade Center – traumatic, unbelievable events that seem impossible, staged even, yet we know actually happened. These are encounters with the real.'

I waited, not entirely comprehending how this connected to UFOs. 'So, maybe you can see where UFOs might fit in. In the stories you've been telling me, the way people talk about UFOs mirrors the confusion we feel when confronted with something we can't explain – a very useful definition of the real, don't you think? For instance, if a UFO were to land in the middle of Melbourne University right now, it would throw us all into panic. It would be as if the UFO came from the real itself.'

We were back at the entrance to the East (or West) Tower. 'I'll give you a couple of books on Lacan to read,' Ken said. 'It may be a starting point for you to think about UFO sightings as confrontations with the real.'

I took Ken's books home and tried to read them, but it would be some time before they made any good sense to me (one of these days I'll return them, too). In the meantime I decided that if I was to understand ufology I needed to go right back to the beginning, to the very first flying saucer sighting. There was only one place where I could get what I wanted. It was time to hit the library.

The first step of any long journey, a wise person once said, *is through the doors of a library.* That person may or may not have been the moody and deeply conflicted schoolmaster Melvil 'Decimal' Dewey, but either way the sentiment rings true for me. Some people get their kicks from climbing mountains; others look for the sublime in the silences of cathedrals. Me, I love the feeling of standing in a hall where the book-laden shelves stretch as far as the eye can see, knowing that one lifetime would never be enough to read all the books in the world.

And so it was within the bluestone halls of the State Library of Victoria that I found all the UFO books I could ever hope to

read, including a pristine 1949 first edition of Donald Keyhoe's *The Flying Saucers Are Real!*, considered the first book wholly devoted to the 'flying saucer mania' (although I added the exclamation mark – I think it's in keeping with the incipient Cold War hysteria of the times).

The first UFO sighting of the modern era was reported by a 32-year-old pilot from Washington State called Kenneth Arnold. On Tuesday 24 June 1947, Arnold altered his flight plan to join the search for a C-46 marine transport aircraft that had crashed somewhere over the Cascade Range in the United States' rugged Pacific Northwest.

Just a few minutes into the search at 2.59 pm, Arnold was distracted by the sudden appearance of nine crescent-shaped aircraft of a type unknown to him. The strange craft skimmed dangerously close to the pine-clad mountainsides in a zigzag formation, just like 'a saucer would if you skipped it across the water' Arnold later told journalists.

Feeling vaguely disconcerted, Arnold watched the aircraft for about three minutes before they disappeared around the mountain's flank. Eventually giving up on the search for the downed Army plane, Arnold resumed his original course, reaching his destination some two hours later. To his surprise, Arnold's strange sighting barely raised an eyebrow among his fellow pilots. 'In fact,' he later wrote, 'several former Army pilots informed me that they had been briefed before going into combat overseas that they might see objects of similar shape and design as I described and assured me that I wasn't dreaming or going crazy.' This was where the term 'foo fighters' originated, in the reports of unidentified aerial objects that chased fighter aircraft over Europe in the closing stages of the war.

Arnold decided to take his story to the FBI, but as the local office was closed he approached the *East Oregonian* newspaper

instead, with fateful consequences. In the media circus that ensued, his 'saucer-like objects' became 'flying saucers,' a term synonymous with UFOs until the 1960s when it was superseded by the more familiar three-letter acronym coined by the US Air Force in a brave attempt to be more objective about the phenomenon.

The US government found itself besieged by frightened citizens demanding an explanation. It must be remembered that in 1947 World War II was barely over; thousands of US troops were still stationed in Europe and the Pacific, and the Cold War was already underway. Fearing mass panic, the government acted swiftly. On 4 July 1947 – surely a date chosen for its symbolic significance – the Air Force issued a press release denying that flying saucers were a secret US weapon. It also claimed that a study of flying saucer reports had not produced sufficient evidence to warrant further investigation. (The US Air Force would ultimately conduct no less than three official investigations into UFOs, the longest-lived and most famous being Project Blue Book, which ran from 1952 to 1969. As with its two predecessors, Projects Sign and Grudge, Project Blue Book found no evidence that UFOs were either an unknown phenomenon or a threat to national security.)

Dismayed by what he considered an official cover-up, Arnold set out to become the world's first ufologist. Funded by *FATE* magazine, an early proponent of UFO sightings, he spent the next few years travelling across America interviewing flying saucer witnesses. His brush with high strangeness left Arnold a changed man, and for the remainder of his life he believed in an increasingly bizarre succession of theories to explain the existence of UFOs.

Within weeks of Arnold's sighting, reports of flying saucer came flooding in from the United States, Europe, Australia, Latin

America and Japan. Many people believed at first that the objects were a secret weapon built by the US or Soviet governments (depending on which side of the Iron Curtain you were on), but it didn't take long for what ufologists call the Extraterrestrial Hypothesis to gain ascendancy. Exponents of this hypothesis became known as 'nuts-and-bolts' ufologists, after their conviction that flying saucers were artefacts of a real, unbelievably advanced, extraterrestrial technology.

I had my books, now I needed coffee – for the two things are inseparable. Look at any medieval illuminated manuscript and you'll see the rings left by the monks' coffee mugs, mistakenly identified as saintly 'halos' by art historians, bless their souls.

By day, Rue Bebélons was home to a menagerie of ne'er-do-well citizens of the inner burgh, the kind of colourful extras a Hollywood director might recruit for a scene depicting the bohemian life if only he or she were not too scared of having the film stock stolen before the cameras started rolling. This is where I did some of my best work, incognito among my fellow freaks without a day job (and with no intention of losing sleep over a night one), hunched over the smallest table in the café, a black and white photograph of Pablo Picasso hanging on the wall behind me.

In the months that followed I shuttled back and forth between the muted hush of the State Library and the more raucous confines of Rue Bebélons. My understanding of ufological history grew steadily, but even at this early stage in my research I could see a contradictory and yet comprehensible logic behind UFOs. 'UFO' stood for 'Unidentified Flying Object', on that I could be sure. But what did this say about these mysterious objects themselves? Very little, other than that they could fly – and nothing about

whether they are shiny or dark, deafening or silent, piloted by humourless little grey beings eager to probe your body cavities or captained by the hottest space-babe this side of Planet Clarion. All of which has been reported by UFO witnesses at one time or another. And then there's all the UFOs that *don't* fly.

But anointing the UFO with those three letters gives it a name of sorts. Ask a frightened witness 'What did you see?' and they could now reply with some measure of confidence, 'I saw a UFO.'

Although ufologists claim precursors to the so-called 'modern' UFO era, I think Arnold's sighting introduced the crucial concept that UFOs were objects that could only be identified as *unidentified*. Before 1947, when people saw something unusual in the skies they tended to explain their experiences in a myriad of different ways: a sign from the gods, a wayward airship, a shamanic vision. After Arnold's sighting, however, the unanswered question mark of the UFO was there for all to see.

I was starting to see why Ken had pointed me in the direction of that mad Frenchman, Jacques Lacan. The strange object in the sky becomes a 'UFO', but in being called that it remains by definition an unidentified thing. Naming an object a 'UFO' makes it less understandable, rather than more so. 'UFOs' may exist as a figure of speech, but they don't actually *mean* anything. I can say 'that's a UFO', but I can't tell you what it is. Nobody can, or at least not yet.

What a fascinating paradox. I suddenly had a vision of old Jacques himself as I sat at work in the State Library, the last light of the day streaming through the great windows in the steel and concrete dome high overhead. The glow of a hundred reading lamps reflecting in his thick spectacles, the enigmatic philosopher raises a finger to the clouds scudding across the darkening sky. '*Les UFOs sont vrai*,' he whispers, '*mais ils n'existent pas*.' The UFOs are real, but they do not exist.

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2

A ROYAL SOCIETY:
BARBARIANS AT THE GATES

I'd made a start to my formal research, but even in this early stage of my journey I harboured an almost covert desire to actually meet ufologists, to walk among them and interact openly in their natural habitat, not just read about them in the State Library. It was like the Melbourne UFO I'd seen in the book my parents brought me in hospital: the knowledge gnawed at me that right here, in the very city in which I lived, there existed a parallel world of ufology.

A pith helmet and elephant gun suddenly materialised before me as I sat taking notes at my carrel. Without a second thought I jammed the helmet down on my head and loaded the rifle. It was time to go on urban safari.

After a quick online search, I learnt that the venerable and internationally renowned Victorian U.F.O. Research Society – VUFORS for short – was holding their next meeting the following week, right here in Melbourne. I decided it would be ill advised to venture into such dangerous territory alone, so I called upon the services of my good friend and physicist-for-hire, Dave.

Bringing to mind some unholy lovechild of Iggy Pop and Richard Dawkins, at six-foot-four and with shoulders to match

Dave made for an imposing sight as he stalked the poorly ventilated halls of the Physics building, chipped coffee mug in one hand and dog-eared computer printouts in the other. Indeed, in physical stature (and occasionally temperament) he resembled nothing more than a fully grown male Wookie that had been subjected to the strategic use of an electric shaver.

Dave's area of expertise was diamonds – or to put it more nerdishly, the physical properties of carbon crystal lattices at a subatomic level (hello, ladies). When I asked if he'd ride shotgun with me at the VUFORS meeting, he accepted readily enough.

'Sure,' Dave said. 'Just don't expect me to explain superstring theory to anyone.' That seemed fair.

The meeting was to be held in the buildings of the Royal Society of Victoria, a dignified Gold Rush-era edifice that had been, I discovered, the colonial branch of the Royal Society of London, that club of scientific minds that had given the world such nerd-heroes as Christopher Wren, Isaac Newton and Joseph Banks. But the Victorian branch had fallen on tough times; a closer inspection showed the paint was cracked and peeling, while the interior had all the charm and comfort of a suburban bingo hall. I couldn't tell whether it was fitting or not that the once proud and ultra-establishment Royal Society had resorted to renting its premises to UFO hunters to pay the bills. No doubt such a turnaround must have appealed hugely to ufologists. The barbarians were within the palace gates – except these savages favoured cardigans and horn-rimmed glasses over the more customary horned helmets and necklaces of human ears.

Two men in business suits took our money at the ticket desk. We were handed over-large nametags to wear, the kind given to parents attending a kindergarten open day or corporate visitors touring a factory processing floor; I wrote my name in

bold type before handing the pen over to Dave, which he took reluctantly. This formality completed, we were ushered into the Royal Society hall.

The meeting was declared open by VUFORS' president, the genteel and yet quite formidable Edith McKenzie. Clad in a brown wool cardigan adorned with a diamond brooch, McKenzie struck me for all the world as the Anglican convener of a Country Women's Association raffle night. I could almost smell the freshly baked scones and lamingtons.

On her right sat the octogenarian Paul Breton, the Society's Investigations and Public Relations Officer. A former US Navy commander and Korean War veteran (or so I read in the newsletter we'd been handed at the door), between the two of them McKenzie and Breton had ruled VUFORS with an iron fist since 1978, keeping the Society alive during a time when so many UFO clubs had fallen by the wayside.

McKenzie introduced the first speaker for the evening, one John Ewing, VUFORS' Technical Analysis Officer. A hefty man in his early thirties, Ewing's grey business suit ensemble and poorly managed hair screamed IT professional. A garish tie completed the picture; a dozen or so fluorescent green aliens stared out from Ewing's chest, drawing the eye away from his mouth, which was now moving in small, chewing circles. Ewing was talking, I realised.

'Recently there have been an alarming number of hoaxes reportedly perpetrated by *teenagers*' – the audience practically hissed at the word – 'letting off rocket flares at night. Do not be fooled – *know your flares from your Nocturnal Lights!*' He glared at us over the lectern, as if expecting a confession that very moment. A ufological show-trial – now that would be something to see.

Ewing unveiled a large wall-mounted map of Victoria. Over the central part of the state he'd marked an elongated 'C' in red

ink by joining about six or seven points together. 'The red line represents the reconstructed flight path of the formation of UFOs seen by witnesses across the state on the nights of January 5 and 6 of this year,' he explained. 'Each dot is a sighting. I believe that this is evidence, beyond reasonable doubt that Victoria is *still* under surveillance.' The gathering murmured in consternation.

At this point Paul Breton, who had been falling asleep in his seat, came fully awake. Eyes bright with excitement, he leapt to his feet. 'I believe in the existence of extraterrestrial beings,' he proclaimed, 'and they are watching us!' The gathering broke into rapturous applause.

I sneaked a look at Dave sitting there on his unpadded pew, back ramrod straight, knuckles turning white. He chose not to return my glance, which may have been just as well for I had no wish to glimpse the flames of hell Dave's scientific soul was roasting in at that moment.

But the meeting was only just warming up. 'The best unexplained sighting of the last three months,' Ewing continued, 'was caught on videotape at 5.40 pm on the evening of Thursday the sixth of May of this year, in the locale of Frankston beach. I have examined this tape with all possible scientific analyses at my disposal and consider it, in my best estimate, to be authentic.' With the enunciation of that last word, *authentic*, Ewing had the audience's full attention.

'The witness, whom I shall refer to as "Tony", stated that at the time of the sighting he was filming the sunset over Port Phillip Bay. While executing this action the witness observed an aerial Object' – Ewing clearly pronounced the capital 'O' – 'with the apparent size of a fifty-cent coin hovering at an elevation of approximately three thousand metres on a south by southwest bearing. Tony filmed the Object for approximately three minutes before it accelerated away vertically. Thanks to his footage, we

now have highly reliable evidence that Unidentified Flying Objects are observing greater Melbourne.' Ewing paused to let this sink in. 'Ladies and gentlemen,' he finished in portentous tones, 'what you are now about to see is the first public viewing of this evidence.'

Ewing switched on the video. The audience craned forward expectantly as a series of images began to unfurl on the screen. Ufologists absolutely live for moments like this; for them, the next 'unexplained sighting' could be the one that finally proves the existence of UFOs.

The tape opened with a sweeping panorama of a long, yellow beach dotted with people strolling along the sands, enjoying the unseasonably fine autumn weather. 'Um, let's fast forward over this,' offered Ewing, and the strolling Fransktonians abruptly became fitness-obsessed Frankstonians jogging awkwardly along the beach.

Finally we arrived at the climactic sequence. Up until this point, the ufologists gathered here tonight under the banner of total scientific revolution had shown all the passion and fire of a birdwatching club. But as the UFO's image came into focus, so too did the Society's true character. With a single intake of breath the audience gasped, and with its exhalation a woman in the front row cried out in hushed and awestruck tones, 'There it *is*!'

What was on the tape? Or perhaps more properly, what did *I* see? In many ways, Tony's tape was representative of the classic UFO film. With no landmarks in the background for comparison, all meaningful perspective was lost: size, distance and relative motion of the 'Object' were all sacrificed for a negligibly improved image resolution. The object, whatever it was, appeared as a blurry, greyish blot in the middle of the shot. In the frame-by-frame analysis that followed, Ewing identified several features that I simply couldn't see, such as a row of flashing lights. At one

point the blot disappeared abruptly, only to reappear again a moment later. Breton, whose eyesight I feared was no longer what it had been during his navy days, declared this to be an example of extraterrestrial dematerialisation technology; however, as the camera's auto focus had been set at infinity when it was pointed at the featureless sky, this effect was repeated several times as the microchip controlling the lens sought to focus and refocus on nothing in particular. All of which is a way of saying that I had absolutely no idea what we were looking at.

No such uncertainties afflicted the ufologists present. A commotion broke out near the front of the hall, interrupting Ewing's jargon-filled analysis. Exploding with excitement, a middle-aged woman in light blue cardigan and skirt – she could easily have belonged to the same CWA chapter as McKenzie – jumped to her feet.

'Edith! Edith!' she called out to VUFORS' president, her face a deep, bright red. 'That's the object I saw! *It's the same one!*'

The witness (who wasn't wearing a nametag, incidentally) began recounting her UFO account, hands clasped tightly before her like a schoolgirl. 'This is my very first sighting,' she told us, a beatific smile illuminating her features. 'After all these years I'd lost hope that I would ever see a UFO, *but there it is*, corroborated by an independent witness. Oh, it was the most beautiful sight I've ever seen!'

'Very impressive, very impressive indeed,' Ewing interrupted, seeking to regain control of his hijacked presentation. 'Ladies and gentlemen, we have here an authentic tape, which I consider to be completely unaltered. And now a second, independent witness who saw the same Object the previous day. Hmmm' – and I swear he rubbed a non-existent beard for effect. 'Consider this: if we were to take a bearing between Geelong in the west and Frankston in the east, I think you'll find that the lines triangulate in the

vicinity of the "officially closed" RAAF base at Point Cook. But is the base actually closed?'

At this a number of men in the audience cried out 'Hear! Hear!'

Sensing his moment of power, Ewing pushed on. 'Why is a former Air Force base off limits to the public? What is the Australian government hiding? I'll leave you to draw your own conclusions.' The gathering broke into a dozen excited conversations.

Dave had said nothing during this entire exchange. 'Are you alright?' I whispered. Before he could answer, however, Breton was on his feet, asking for silence.

'As y'all know,' he was saying, 'we like to finish our VUFORS meetings with a few minutes of questions from the floor. So, what y'all got for us this time?'

A lone woman in the front row raised a hand timorously. 'Is it normal,' she asked in a wavering voice, 'to feel scared and confused at first?'

Breton appeared nonplussed by the question. He looked to McKenzie for assistance, but before either could respond the woman pressed on.

'I mean, is it normal to feel scared after experiencing something . . . *strange*?' The woman rose unsteadily to her feet. (Damn it, she wasn't wearing a nametag either! Was it only Dave and I who'd bothered with this formality?)

With emotions barely in check, she addressed the room. Three months ago, she told us, something terrible had happened to her. A *presence* had entered her home at night, while she lay in bed. Hours later she awoke with no memories of what had transpired but for a conviction that she had been taken somewhere else, somewhere terrifying.

'I don't know what the *presence* wanted from me,' she said, stronger now as the words surged forth, 'but I need somebody to talk to. I need to understand what *happened* to me.'

The congregation was suddenly silent. Although nobody said the words out loud, it seemed they were all thinking the same thing: this woman had been abducted by aliens. But VUFORS, I knew, was an old-school nuts-and-bolts UFO society that traditionally distrusted the deeply personal and, to their way of thinking, overly subjective accounts of alien abductees.

This prejudice goes right back to ufology's original schism in the 1950s, when certain UFO witnesses known as 'contactees' came forward with unbelievable stories of having met and, in some cases, travelled through outer space with flying saucer occupants (who were remarkably human-like, had excellent teeth and spoke good English). Nuts-and-bolts ufologists, who believed that the existence of UFOs could only be proven with hard scientific evidence, rejected the contactees' claims outright, excommunicating them from the Church of Ufology. When claims of alien abduction first started appearing in the 1960s, stories of sexual abuse at the hands of impassive extraterrestrials seemed uncomfortably similar to the sensational claims of the contactees, and so it was not until the 1980s that alien abductees finally entered the muddied waters of the ufological mainstream.

This lingering distrust of personal extraterrestrial contact clearly showed now on the faces of McKenzie and Breton. 'Well, I can say to you that both Edith and myself will be on hand after the meeting,' Breton told the woman crisply. 'We will endeavour to get you the help you need.'

I've often wondered since where VUFORS referred the abductee woman to. With their nuts-and-bolts bias, surely they wouldn't have sent her to a rival alien abduction research

group. But would they have recommended her to a mainstream psychologist? Perhaps I don't want to know.

Breton called for more questions. 'Ooh, ooh, excuse me! Hello!' It was a small man in his twenties, wearing an Adidas tracksuit and waving a battered videotape in one hand, nearly jumping out his seat with impatience. His nametag said 'Steve'.

'Can I show my video now, please?' Steve asked loudly. Reluctantly, Breton allowed the excited little man the stage.

'This video is about alien abductions, and it's the Truth,' Steve announced, before pressing the play button.

After the excitement of Tony's tape, I can't say what I was expecting from Steve . . . but it wasn't *this*. The 'Truth' about alien abductions turned out to be a rather lurid piece of tabloid reporting from an American cable TV show. Steve had obviously taped the telecast himself – the late-night ads featuring naughty co-eds waiting for your call were still there. Paul Breton's eyes bulged beneath their thick bifocals.

'The extraterrestrials are interested in observing human sexuality,' a serious-looking reporter with an immovable haircut intoned. An actor dressed in an alien costume monitored the human test-subjects, taking notes on a plastic clipboard folder. In the background, somebody's idea of space-age electronic music played. *Ah*, I thought. *Alien porn. Excellent*.

The reaction of the rest of the congregation was, however, less favourable. As befitted the dignity and refined manners of the Southern Hemisphere's oldest ufological society, the audience was palpably shocked by Steve's contribution. Unable to contain his outrage, Breton stomped over to the video player and hit the eject button right in the middle of an abductee explaining exactly where the aliens inserted their probes.

Steve appeared supremely unconcerned by the stir he'd created. Accepting his tape back from a glaring Breton, he

sauntered back to his seat, a huge smile splitting his face. Dave leaned over to me.

'Now this guy,' he said, wearing the same evil grin as Steve, '*this guy I like*.'

Standing alone on the stage, Breton seemed to be struggling to find something to say. Although the ex-Navy man struck me as a cranky old pedant who probably thought anyone who hadn't fought in the Korean War was, by definition, a Communist, I must admit to feeling a surge of sympathy for him at that moment. What this man must have endured as the Public Relations Officer of a UFO club – it boggled the mind.

Breton had found his words. They were not forgiving.

'Thank you, Steven, for your time,' he said frostily to a still grinning Steve. 'But I would take this moment to remind y'all,' Breton continued, a glint of steel entering his voice, 'of the aims and principles of this here Society.

'I have been a Committee member of the Victorian UFO Research Society for more years than many of you have been alive,' Breton began. 'I am proud to be a member. VUFORS is dedicated to discovering the Truth behind the strange aerial phenomena reported in our skies since '47. But we must remain resolute. If we are to find success in our goal of proving the existence of these Unidentified Flying Objects, we must restrict ourselves to investigating evidence of only *sufficient and serious* scientific value – and nothing more!'

Breton's speech was met with thunderous applause. McKenzie and Ewing rose to their feet. Swept away by the moment, I found myself joining the ovation.

Dave turned to face me, pale and haggard as if he'd just discovered everything he'd ever worked for was in vain. 'Bloody hell,' he said, grimacing with his whole body, 'I need a fuckin' drink.'

Twenty minutes later we were at Rue Bebélons, which was full of the usual midweek crowd of late-night city workers that had always made Melbourne great: doctors, lawyers and Freemasons.

Once our drinks arrived I raised my glass in a toast, looking Dave sternly in the eye.

'I drink,' I began, 'to remember.' And took a swig.

Dave returned my gaze evenly. 'I drink,' he replied, without a hint of humour in his eyes, 'to *forget*.'

'I drink to understand,' I said, taking another gulp.

'I drink to *lose my way*.'

'I drink to see clearly.'

'I drink to *forget*.'

'Hang on, you've already said that one,' I jumped in.

'No I have not,' Dave said indignantly.

'Yes you bloody well have,' I repeated.

'Well, maybe I did. Must've forgotten,' he grumbled. But we both took another drink anyway.

Finally, the sense of alienation we'd felt in the meeting was lifting. Dave, it seemed, was ready to talk about his impressions of the Victorian UFO Research Society.

'Well, look. It wasn't rocket science,' he began. 'Those guys wanted to be scientists *so* badly, but they simply weren't.

'At best, it felt to me like some kind of trainspotting club run by retired high-school science teachers stuck in a 1960s crystal radio time-warp,' he continued. 'For fuck's sake, there's only so many times I could ask a witness, "And how big was the spacecraft compared to a fifty-cent coin?" Anyway,' he added, and suddenly I saw the lecturer that Dave would one day become, 'the parallax view is useful for estimating the size of an object *only* if you know how far away it is, which they had no way of judging – so

they were trying to get data about size and speed by using two unknowns, which is *mathematically impossible*.'

He paused for a moment. Dave thought like this: in considered, explosive bursts of cogitation. 'But they clearly loved *acting* like scientists,' I said.

'Oh yeah, sure,' Dave replied. 'Who doesn't? *I'm* doing it right now. But these guys were coming from an *a priori* assumption that flying saucers are real. Right. So all we need to do is get hold of their hypergalactic space-drive and we can go beat the shit out of the Russkies and the Taliban and, hell, the Dalai Lama too, why not? Well, that's not science, and they know it. I don't want to see red lines drawn on a map, I want the alien sex goddess right here, right now! Show me the aliens – *show me the fucking aliens!*'

'What about the Frankston tape? There was something on it, wasn't there?' I persisted. 'VUFORS will say it was a UFO.'

'It was nothing,' Dave replied with great conviction. 'No,' he corrected himself. 'It was *a* nothing. No data there at all – that sighting didn't mean shit scientifically, even if that really was the alien mothership with William Burroughs on the bridge and Elvis singing in the lounge.'

The bar was beginning to empty; I guessed the doctors and lawyers and Freemasons were heading home to hang upside-down in their caves so they could be awake and limber for their 6 am Pilates classes. Bucking the trend, a newly arrived patron pulled up the barstool next to me. '*Un cognac, s'il vous plaît*,' breathed a sibilant, sepia-tinged French voice.

I turned to see my cocktail-distorted features looking back at me – twice. I realised I was staring into the lenses of a pair of extremely thick glasses. Their wearer lit up a Gauloises, inhaling deeply so that the tip of the cigarette flared like a tiny nocturnal light, scudding through the dark firmament of Rue Bebélons' suddenly vast and empty interior.

'*Les UFOs, ils ne sont rien. Mais parfois une petite chose peut venir de rien*,' the figure whispered. Or did it? Did I actually hear the words? *The UFOs, they are nothing. But sometimes something can come from nothing.*

I raised my glass, emboldened by drink. '*Salut*,' I said, taking a long pull to quell my fright.

Dave looked at me quizzically. 'What was that?' he asked, putting down his drink.

I hesitated a moment. 'Uh, no, just making another toast. To science and disbelief, you know.'

Dave smiled wearily. 'I'll drink to that. By the way, did you order that cognac? 'Cos I'll have it if you don't want it.'

I handed the drink to Dave. I can't stand that stuff, personally; and besides, it seemed the now departed patron who'd ordered it had decided against indulging in the evils of drink after all.

VUFORS had struck a chord for me. I was in no way swayed by the beliefs of its members; if anything, watching their earnest pantomime of scientific analysis convinced me that, even if I wasn't a card-carrying sceptic, then I was at least a creature of a recognisably Newtonian-Einsteinian worldview. Rather, it was that damn twitchy curiosity that whispered in my ear again.

I might have been a scholar first and an adventurer second, but after this brief immersion in the UFO subculture I wanted to see more of the world of high strangeness. The alternate world of ufology has very little in the way of physical memories, it wasn't like I was a historian who could follow a trail of monuments or battle sites – so I resolved instead to go where the *belief* was strongest, not the evidence.

America would be my goal, for if there is anywhere on this under-appreciated little globe of ours that could be called the birthplace of UFOs, it is America. In 1947 it had been ordinary

Americans who, at a unique moment in history when their nation was vulnerable enough to fear invasion but strong enough to believe it could take on all challengers, had thought to explain strange things seen in the sky as intelligently controlled objects from outer space.

First stop would have to be Roswell, New Mexico, ufology's ground zero, for it was here that a flying saucer allegedly crashed in 1947. According to ufologists, the US government recovered the crashed saucer (some say along with its occupants) and had been merrily and clandestinely adapting the alien technology for use in its military arsenal ever since.

Second on the list was the White Sands Missile Range, also in New Mexico. It was here that the victorious US Army tested the V-2 missiles captured from the Nazis at the end of the Second World War, an event almost as important to post-war history as the detonation of the atomic bomb, although less well known. Among other things, the V-2 tests at White Sands provided the inspiration for the persistent rumours that captured Nazi scientists had been secretly put to work deciphering the alien technology salvaged from the Roswell crash.

After New Mexico I planned to travel further west into Nevada, where the mysterious and fiercely guarded Area 51 – another top-secret military test range – was located. Area 51 was reputedly where the flying saucer captured at Roswell ended up, and although I had no desire (or hope, for that matter) of penetrating its defences, I planned to visit the desert communities around the base's perimeter, where ufologists watched the skies with rapt anticipation for the next 'back-engineered' secret weapon to stave off – or perhaps hasten – the next world war. Who watches the watchmen? That'd be me, I guess.

From Nevada I'd go to the Mojave Desert of California to visit the holy sites of the so-called contactees, a peace-loving mystical

movement within ufology that flourished during the 1950s among the Joshua trees and ghost towns. Here I imagined myself walking up to a shaggy-bearded hermit living in a cave overlooking Death Valley, waiting for a sign from the heavens that the space brothers were returning, to say 'Greetings, Earthling – I come in peace.'

I looked at the map of the United States laid out on my desk. As far as ufological grand tours went, this was the full experience. The only problem was funding. I was broke in the way only a grad student or an actor can be – if I pursued my dream I wouldn't have time to work on the side, but if I took on extra work to support my dream I wouldn't be able to pursue it. 'Damn,' I said out loud, but it did little to change the facts.

I showed my plans to my supervisors in the hope the university had unneeded money lying around, stuffed into a professor's armchair for extra padding, perhaps. Initially Ken and Peter weren't convinced that an overseas trip was absolutely necessary for my research, but a few weeks after I made my proposal Ken called me back for a meeting in his office.

'There's a conference in the United States coming up soon that I think you should consider attending,' Ken said without preamble. I sat up straighter in my chair. 'I've checked with the department, and the university can provide funding for this trip.'

'That's fantastic!' I enthused. 'Where will the conference be?'

'Albuquerque, New Mexico,' said Peter, smiling with encouragement. 'Not far from a town called Roswell, which I believe you've heard of.'

It dawned on me that I'd just been handed a gift. Forsaking the earnest demeanour I usually reserved for my supervisory meetings, I broke into a broad and uncontained grin.

'While you're over there, you might also do some of the fieldwork you've been talking about,' said Ken, sounding like a

colonel about to send out a crack team on a suicide mission in an Alistair MacLean novel.

'Of course,' I stammered.

Fixing me with his Guns of Navarone stare, Ken leant in closer. 'And listen, Martin,' he said, 'try not to get abducted, will you?'

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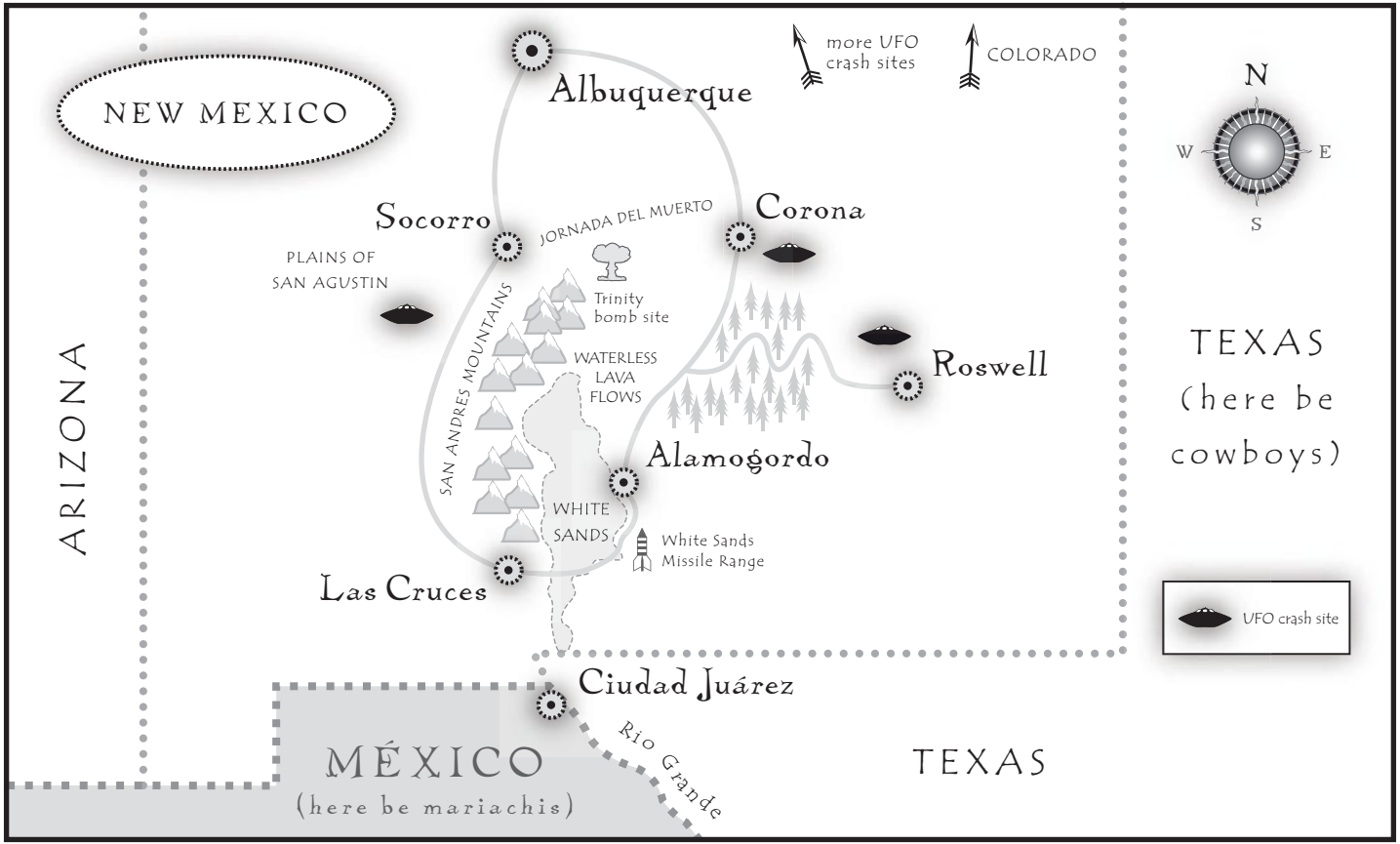
NEW MEXICO
Albuquerque
more UFO crash sites
COLORADO
N
W
E
S
Socorro
JORNADA DEL MUERTO
Corona
PLAINS OF SAN AGUSTIN
Trinity bomb site
SAN ANDRES MOUNTAINS
WATERLESS LAVA FLOWS
Roswell
TEXAS (here be cowboys)
ARIZONA
Alamogordo
WHITE SANDS
White Sands Missile Range
Las Cruces
UFO crash site
Ciudad Juárez
Rio Grande
MÉXICO (here be mariachis)
TEXAS

3

ROSWELL:
THE LONG FALL BACK TO EARTH

I flew direct across the Pacific, gaining a day when the plane crossed the International Dateline to arrive in LA fully twenty minutes before I'd left Melbourne. The United States of early 2002 was absolutely crawling with aliens and, as it turned out, I was one of them.

Only a few months had passed since the terrorist attacks of September 2001. Although I was a long way from the epicentre of that great, tragic, seismic event of our times, the whole country was in a state of shock and mourning. In the weeks I spent criss-crossing the deserts and ranges of the American West, the national mood had begun to sour into one of congealing suspicion. Who could blame them, really, yet it did make my travels in the United States somewhat trying. With my antipodean accent and highly suspect penchant for *walking* places, people didn't know what to make of me. Then there were the endless airport security checks, the stony-faced air marshals keeping their Tasers trained on my solar plexus while I was dusted down by muscular women in hairnets and ill-fitting security guard uniforms. There were friendly folk, too, and we'll meet some of them soon – but it

was highly strange times to be an alien in America, even a legal one, make no mistake.

After a sleepless night in a Venice Beach youth hostel being terrorised by an Argentinean street performer who woke me with threats of Patagonian violence at the slightest hint of a snore escaping my lips, I gratefully boarded an early morning connection for Albuquerque. From the air the New Mexican capital was a touchingly small cluster of suburbs huddling together for warmth on the high desert plain, the green ribbon of the Rio Grande the only concession to colour in the muted pastels of the landscape below.

Unfortunately for me, within minutes of touching down in that high and dry city I was struck by a strain of local flu virus against which my Southern Hemispheric immunity offered little protection. I felt encased in layers of bubble wrap – I could've sworn my feet didn't touch US soil again for a full two weeks after arriving in New Mexico.

Dragging myself from bed, the conference went as well as one could expect under such circumstances. I gave my paper; I went to other people's papers; and while the academic in-crowd was networking over bourbons-and-dry in the bar of the Albuquerque Hilton, I was shivering with a moderately high fever in the nearby Comfort Inn, not feeling very comfortable at all. Eventually the ordeal finished (the conference or the fever, you pick) and I felt recovered enough to catch a bus to Roswell, more than five hours away in the south-eastern corner of the state.

The dusty old Greyhound loped through the broken ranges and cottonwood-lined valleys that dominate central New Mexico, before entering a region of parched sagebrush plains; it was in this sheep ranching country that a flying saucer allegedly crashed in July 1947. Nobody actually saw the impact, but ufologists believe they have reconstructed the doomed craft's final moments.

Summer thunderstorms were sweeping the state; witnesses in the Roswell area, unable to sleep in the unbearably torrid weather, reported seeing a glowing disc careering through the night sky sometime around the 4th of July. Beyond these basic points of agreement, however, the story diverges into multiple versions like a many-headed Hydra.

In one scenario, the saucer is struck by lightning in midair. Shedding debris across the terrain below, the saucer barely clears the needle-sharp ranges surrounding the White Sands Missile Range only to crash on the Plains of San Agustin near Socorro. In another version not one but *two* flying saucers collide in midair. What's not so well known about the Roswell Incident is that it wasn't the only one – over the next few years UFOs were falling like flies all over the South West. In 1948 alone, flying saucer crashes were reported near the New Mexico towns of Aztec and Farmington, while in 1953 yet another crash was rumoured to have occurred near Kingman, Arizona. With such a poor safety record, you'd think the aliens would want to back-engineer *our* technology.

The crucial thing about the Roswell Incident, however, was that something was left behind: the debris supposedly collected from the crash site, wherever it actually was. If a simple UFO sighting from a distance counts as a Close Encounter of the First Kind, then the Roswell Incident comes in as a Close Encounter of the Second Kind, where the UFO leaves behind material evidence of its passage through normal reality. (A Close Encounter of the Third Kind only occurs when there's direct contact between witnesses and the UFO occupants; sceptics will note that Steven Spielberg named his celebrated 1977 film after the ufological term, and not the other way around).

People in Roswell are still trying to make sense of just what came to earth during the thunder and rain of that night, but for some the matter is more than just academic.

The lights went out, and suddenly I was standing alone in a very dark place. 'Step up to the window,' a voice called out from out of the darkness behind me. I did as I was told. My breath frosted the pane of glass before me.

'What do you see?' asked the voice.

'I see . . .' I said, and realised I was at a loss for words. 'I see wonderful things. I see a city.'

It stretched out below me, glowing brilliantly in the dark. Gold, vermilion, green, fluorescing preternaturally like the fungal growth inside some extraterrestrial god's colossal inner ear. An expanse of strange, oddly window- and door-less buildings stretched to the disconcertingly close and ink-black horizon. There were no straight lines or right angles in this metropolis; instead the manic towers rose in concentric rings, reminiscent of the stupas of Tibet but soaring impossibly high over the curving streets below. Well, not streets, really, more like slipways, a fluid network of tributaries and anabranches built for the passage of motile and intelligent gaseous beings beyond our ability to imagine. Momentarily, I was transported – but I cannot say to *where*, exactly.

As I stood there, face against the cool windowpane, I saw that the light emanating from the city's twisting precincts was beginning to fade. I craned my head to get a last glimpse of the alien vista before it receded into the blackness altogether. Looking more closely at one of the towers, I had the sudden and shattering impression that it was in fact a round, plastic ice-cream bucket.

A light bulb hanging from the ceiling came to life abruptly, obliterating the vision of the alien city. The door behind me opened and the lanky dude with the Southern accent I'd spoken to before entered the room, a diffident smile upon his face.

'Wow,' I said. 'That was quite something. But what's it all actually made of?'

The Southern dude's smile broadened. 'Junk, mostly, to tell the honest truth,' he answered. 'Billy, he didn't mind where he got his materials from, jus' so long as it didn't have no straight lines in it. Them aliens weren't none impressed by straight lines, he did tell me.' He pointed to the model city, crammed into what was in fact a large cupboard, perhaps the size of a janitor's closet, with the walls painted black to give the illusion of empty space. A plywood barrier topped by a thin sheet of glass separated the viewer from the alien vision. 'In there there's old tins, light fittings, ice-cream tubs' – ah, just as I'd thought – 'anything we threw out, Billy would use – as long as it had no straight lines, as I say.'

'And did Billy paint it all himself?'

'Yessir,' my guide replied. 'With fluorescent paint to glow in the dark, jus' like the planet where Billy said the aliens took him.'

'Cool,' I said, and the Southern dude smiled again at my enthusiasm. Motioning for me to follow him, he switched off the light in the viewing compartment and we returned to the main area of the shop.

Through the storefront window I could see the traffic trundling up and down the main street. We stood there among the alien stuffed toys, Darth Vader coffee mugs and flying saucer fridge magnets. I was finally in Roswell, the craven Mecca of ufology, and I was feeling somewhat deflated by its cattle-town normality. Billy's story intrigued me, however. Anyone with such an ungodly preference for bright, splashy colour must have a seriously oblique view of the world.

'So who was this Billy, again?' I asked.

'Well, Billy shows up here one day asking for a job,' the dude explained. 'He said he didn't want to sell no merchandise, jus'

fix things up and keep an eye on the place. The boss, he said hell, why not? We were getting a lot of shoplifting in them days, having another hand about made sense.

'But then Billy starting telling about how aliens took him in their spacecraft and flew him to their home planet. He started making little models to show us what it looked like, and that's when the boss had an idea. He said, "Billy, if you build a model of them aliens' planet I'll let people see the place the aliens took you". And charge them two dollars a peep, jus' like I charged you,' he added, chuckling good-humouredly.

'And was Billy alright with this?' I'd heard that some abductees don't want to discuss their experiences, as they find them too painful to relive.

The dude shook his head. 'No sir, Billy did not mind, not at all. I never did see Billy happier than when he was in that room, painting all them empty cans and chocolate boxes.'

I sensed a scoop here. Perhaps Roswell would offer something truly unexpected, after all.

'When does Billy come in next? I'd love to talk with him.'

The dude shook his head again. 'Well, Billy don't exactly come to town much anymore,' he explained.

'Oh?' I said, feeling the moment slip by. 'Does he live nearby?'

'God only knows, and He ain't in the mood for telling,' the dude answered with great and unfeigned sadness. 'Billy didn't come in one day and we never did see him again. Heard he passed through Carlsbad way, but I can't rightly tell you where he went. All he left behind was his city. Poor Billy,' and he lowered his eyes in some kind of prayer for the living or the dead – or the abducted, as it might be in Billy's case.

I left soon after, but not before buying a glow-in-the-dark fridge magnet that said 'I ‹heart› Roswell' – it's still on my fridge door, right next to the postcard of a flying saucer I bought in

Tepoztlán, Mexico (the postcard, not the flying saucer). Stepping out onto the street and into a desert winter's day, I felt a jarring moment of disjuncture between the surreal contents of the shop and the almost too prosaic main street of this oddly everyday town, laid out flat like a tablecloth across the sagebrush-frosted plains that stretched from here to the Texas border. Pickup trucks rolled down along the asphalt carrying hay or wheelbarrows or fencing wire – anything but dead aliens.

'Enjoy your stay in Roswell, sir,' called the dude with the Southern manners, and I began the weary slog back to my budget motel on the northern edge of town, the somewhat tarnished Desert Star Inn. This was Roswell, New Mexico, in all its unwarranted glory: Wal-Mart, Taco Bell, electrical goods stores, City Hall, a Subway restaurant. In the week I spent walking the streets of this desert town, I often heard Dave's voice going around in my head helplessly, a nagging feeling that I would not find what I was looking for in this place: *Show me the aliens! Show me the fucking aliens!*

The story goes that sheep rancher William 'Mac' Brazel heard a loud explosion during the storm on the evening of Wednesday 2nd July 1947. Or was it the 3rd? Brazel could never remember – he assumed the loud bang was just part of the electrical storm and promptly forgot the incident. Whatever the actual date, the next morning Brazel awoke to find what looked like debris from an aircraft crash strewn across one of his paddocks. Puzzled, but not overly interested, Brazel went back to work. It would not be until the morning of Saturday 5th July when he went into Corona to buy a new jeep that he learnt of the saucer-mania that had gripped the nation since Kenneth Arnold's June 24 sighting, not two weeks earlier.

'Mac' Brazel is the first of the Wild West type of characters that feature so prominently in tales of American ufology – and perhaps the most authentically Western, at that. In a photo of Brazel taken at the time he's somewhere in his thirties, wearing a denim shirt and a big old cowboy hat. Peering uncomfortably out of the picture, I'd bet Brazel posed for the shot under duress. People who knew Brazel well admitted that nobody really knew him well; although he had a wife and children, he lived alone for months on end, sleeping out on the range in a primitive hut lacking phone or radio. In ufological writings he's often portrayed as a naïve but patriotic cowboy who allowed himself to be duped by the Air Force – apart from a radio interview he gave directly after the Incident, Brazel sullenly refused to comment on the matter again. He died in 1963 without ever speaking to a ufologist.

Major (later Lieutenant-Colonel) Jesse Marcel was an altogether different character. During World War II he served with Air Force Intelligence, and was credited with five 'kills' over New Guinea (where he was also shot down once himself). He subsequently joined the 509th Bomb Wing at Roswell, the same squadron that dropped the atomic bombs on Japan in 1945. In the parlance of nuts-and-bolts ufology, Marcel was the epitome of the 'reliable witness.' Well, almost.

The thing was, Marcel never came out and said, 'Yessir, I saw the wreckage of a crashed flying saucer and I'm proud to say it! And no sir, I am not a communist!' Instead, Marcel conducted himself in a manner becoming a US Air Force intelligence officer, which is to say he gave nothing away about what the Air Force recovered from Brazel's land. Well, almost nothing.

On Monday 7th July, Marcel and a Counter Intelligence Corps agent named Sheridan Cavitt (who, aside from this brief appearance, never features in ufological history again) followed Brazel out to the debris site. Marcel's main concern was that

the crashed aircraft was of 'some unusual sort' – either from the nearby White Sands Missile Range, where the V-2 rockets were kept or, more worryingly, an unknown Soviet device. Flying saucers, it seems, didn't cross his mind. What he found, however, confounded him.

Marcel never described the debris collected from the crash site as belonging to a 'flying saucer.' He always simply called it 'wreckage,' describing the odd little objects – nothing of which would be out of place in a local trash heap – in terms of what they were *not*. 'There was all kinds of stuff – small beams about three-eighths or half an inch square with some sort of hieroglyphics on them that nobody could decipher,' Marcel explained to ufologists William L. Moore and Stanton T. Friedman when they interviewed him in 1978. 'These looked something like balsa wood, and were of about the same weight, except that they were not wood at all.' According to Marcel, the balsa wood material did not burn when subjected to flame.

There were also many small pieces of tinfoil-like material scattered about the crash site, except that it wasn't tinfoil. 'The odd thing about this foil,' Marcel's son Jesse Jr later recalled, 'was that you could wrinkle it and lay it back down and it immediately resumed its original shape.' (I myself also witnessed this extraordinary behaviour – while watching the made-for-TV movie *Roswell* in my parents' lounge room in 1994. The SFX people used stop-motion photography to make the tin foil unfold back into its original shape. It looked pretty crap to tell the truth, like something from a second-rate 1960s Ray Harryhausen sword-and-sandals epic. Guess you had to be there.)

The next stage in the story is one that makes conspiracy theorists pant a little more shallowly. The day after Marcel retrieved the wreckage, the Roswell Army Air Base's Commanding Officer, Colonel (later Major-General) William H. Blanchard, ordered

the material sent to Fort Worth in Texas for analysis. Meanwhile, Blanchard summoned his Public Information Officer and ordered a press release confirming that the Air Force had recovered a crashed flying saucer.

Some ufologists argue that Blanchard's orders were a smokescreen set up to hide the switch of the real, extraterrestrial material for a smashed-up weather balloon – but if so, he was burning a stack of old tyres in the middle of a petrochemical dump and the smoke column was *ten miles high*. Within minutes of the press release going out, the Air Force's Public Information Office was swamped with calls from news agencies all over the world, eager to hear what the spacemen looked like.

Realising their mistake, the Air Force back-pedalled faster than a Tour de France rider in a one-way street. As soon as the wreckage landed in Fort Worth, Brigadier-General Roger M. Ramey, commander of the Eighth Air Force and the highest-ranking officer within court-martialling distance, called a press conference. A small amount of the material – just as much as Marcel could carry in his two hands – was paraded before the press in Ramey's office. Acting under strict orders, Marcel told the journalists that the material was from a crashed weather balloon. This was the last time that the Roswell debris would be seen in public.

In the famous photos taken of this press conference we see Marcel kneeling in Ramey's office, reverently holding up a sheet of the tinfoil as if expecting the face of a saint to appear on its surface. When Moore and Friedman asked the elderly Marcel in 1978 whether he thought the wreckage came from a downed weather balloon, he replied unequivocally, 'It was definitely not a weather balloon or tracking device, nor was it any sort of plane or missile. What it was we didn't know. We just picked up the

fragments. It was something I had never seen before, or since, for that matter.'

Surprisingly, the world appeared to accept the Air Force's explanation. The Roswell Incident faded from view until 1978, when Moore and Friedman began the investigations that culminated in their bestselling book *The Roswell Incident* (credited to Moore and Charles Berlitz, author of *The Bermuda Triangle* and *The Philadelphia Experiment* who was brought on board by the publishers in an effort to boost sales). Ultimately, the small town of Roswell would be transformed into the unofficial Ground Zero of the strange but ever hopeful faith of ufology.

What I find ironic in this tale is that the whole controversy over government conspiracies and public disinformation wouldn't have got off the ground if it hadn't been for the Air Force's press release in the first place. For the record, this is what it said:

> Roswell Army Air Force Base, Roswell, N.M.
> 8 July 1947, a.m.
> The many rumours regarding the flying disc became a reality yesterday when the intelligence officer of the 509th Bomb Group of the Eighth Air Force, Roswell Army Air Field, was fortunate enough to gain possession of a disc through the cooperation of one of the local ranchers and the sheriff's office of Chaves County.
>
> The flying object landed on a ranch near Roswell some time last week. Not having phone facilities, the rancher stored the disc until such time as he was able to contact the sheriff's office, who in turn notified Major Jesse A. Marcel of the 509th Bomb Group Intelligence Office. Action was immediately taken and the disc was picked up at the rancher's home. It was inspected at the Roswell Army Air Field and subsequently loaned by Major Marcel to higher headquarters.

Quite lurid stuff, really. I can just picture a radio operator with a crew cut reading it out loud in a 1950s science fiction film. But this little piece of ufological history was drafted by First Lieutenant Walter G. Haut, Public Information Officer at the Roswell Army Air Force Base, who still lived in town, although I didn't know it at the time.

I spent a week in Roswell that winter, trudging the lonely mile every day from my cramped lodgings in the Desert Star Inn to the International UFO Museum and Research Center. Originally a movie theatre, the Museum's sleek Art Deco frontage was a well-known landmark in this town of fifty thousand people and about fifty-five thousand pickup trucks. The centrepiece of the Museum was the gruesome rubber alien cadaver, purchased from Fox in 1995 after that network aired its infamous alien autopsy hoax. In the absence of real *real* aliens, a real fake will do, I suppose. (Intriguingly, this is not the only real fake alien autopsy in the world today. The last I saw was in Rome, Italy, in the catacombs beneath the museum of Italian horror movie director Dario Argento.)

But it was the UFO Museum's library that held the most appeal for me. Here I found such rare texts as Frank Scully's *Behind the Flying Saucers*, best remembered today for unwittingly carrying what was possibly ufology's first flying saucer crash hoax, and Erich von Juntz's Teutonic masterpiece *Die Unaussprechlichen Disketten*, little seen outside its native East Germany. A large fresco painted in lurid colours across one wall of the library depicted the crash: the broken saucer wedged between two boulders, its front section (do flying saucers have a front or a back?) torn open by the impact. Smoke billows out of the cracked glass dome, while the alien crew lie scattered among the rocks like rag

dolls . . . which would make sense if the artist used rag dolls to model the extraterrestrials. The lone survivor of the crash, who legend tells would be captured by the US government and put to work on sinister scientific experiments, crawls through the scrub on broken legs.

The turning point in my relations with the resident ufologists at the Museum came on my fourth day in Roswell. The previous day I'd spent several hours taking detailed notes with the help of the self-guided audio tour. Perhaps it was some vestigial disorientation left by the flu I picked up in Albuquerque, or maybe my inner kleptomaniac whispering, 'Go on, do it, you know you're never coming back to this town', but I left the Museum at the end of the day with the audio guide still in my daypack. Realising my error, I returned the battered little Walkman the next morning, apologising profusely all the while.

The nice old ufologist lady at the ticket desk, who was easily in the adult diaper end of her seventies, seemed impressed by my honesty. 'They must breed them well where you come from,' she told me, crinkling the skin around her eyes in a smile of gratitude. Feeling a warm glow despite the desert morning chill, I returned to the museum floor for another gruelling day of research.

Barely five minutes had passed before the nice old ufologist lady was at my side again, patting me gently on the forearm. 'Excuse me, dear,' she said, beaming radiantly through her bifocals, 'but I hope you don't mind if I give you this souvenir as a small token of my appreciation for being so honest.' And I saw that she was holding a small stickpin in the shape of an alien's head, the kind of badge a closet ufologist might wear to a corporate day job.

'No, no, you shouldn't have!' I protested. But of course I gave in. (I've still got that little piece of alien bling; I wore it on the same jacket for so many years that eventually the badge left a circular patch of unfaded material behind it.)

Finally, after much thanking and re-thanking in turn, I made to resume my work. But my new friend had something more to say.

'Pardon me for saying so,' she confided, leaning in a bit closer so nobody else could hear, 'but do you know who you remind me of?'

I couldn't guess. 'Not an alien, I hope,' I joked weakly, fighting the distinct and somewhat disconcerting feeling that I was being come on to.

She giggled indulgently. 'No, dearie, don't be silly.' And now she was speaking in a low breathless whisper. 'You remind me of *Mel Gibson*, that's who!'

I was dumbfounded. One of the supporting cast members of *The Sopranos*, perhaps, but Mad Max himself, drunken movie director and conflicted champion of the Catholic faith . . . no way. Not on this planet, nor any other.

'It must be the accent,' I offered to cover my embarrassment.

She looked at me in bewilderment. 'Which accent is that, dearie?' she asked.

We spent the next few minutes chatting about everything and nothing. I told her about my PhD; she told me how she wasn't sure if aliens truly existed, but volunteering at the Museum beat watching daytime television. 'And I get to meet people from all around the world!' she enthused. Thirty years had fallen from her there and then. America may not always be the most outwardly warm and welcoming of countries, but you do sometimes meet gems of people there, like this lovely old ufologist lady in downtown Roswell. That was close to a decade ago as I write this. I truly hope she's still happy, wherever she might now be.

'Well, young man, I think you should meet Walter,' she was saying. She looked at me expectantly.

'Great!' I said. But then had to ask, 'Who's Walter?'

'Why, Lieutenant Walter Haut, of course!' she replied. 'He wrote the press release that started everything back in '47. Of course he's retired from the Air Force now,' she continued, shaking her head absent-mindedly, 'but Walter's the director of the Museum. I just know he'd love to talk with you, especially if you've come all the way from "Mel-Born" Australia.' I nodded in fervent agreement. Ah, *that* Walter.

Twenty minutes later I was in a chair in Haut's office, waiting for the man himself to arrive. Like most things in Roswell, the ufological theme in the sparsely furnished room was rather muted. An 'I ‹heart› Roswell' coffee mug on the desk, a framed photograph on the wall of Haut in uniform as a young man; that was about it.

Haut hobbled into the office accompanied by his assistant, a no-nonsense looking woman in a bob and pastel cardigan (ufologists, I note, love their woollen garments – must keep 'em warm all those nights out under the stars, waiting for the Big One). Walking stick, glasses, arthritic knuckles, Haut must've been in his eighties. He settled into the padded leather chair behind his desk while his assistant left us to speak alone, closing the door behind her. 'What brings you all the way from Down Under, Mr Plowman?' Haut asked with surprising warmth in his eyes.

In July 1947 Haut was Roswell's Public Information Officer, a kind of media officer that, like all media officers in time of war (even cold wars, as it was then), worked primarily with the delicate and strategic release of propaganda. Haut retired from the US Army a few months after the Roswell fiasco; ufologists jumped on this as evidence of a cover-up, claiming Haut had been gagged by the government, but Haut always staunchly denied this. He stayed on in Roswell, at one time operating an art gallery, but his greatest success was the International UFO Museum and Research Center, where he had been co-director since 1991.

I decided to jump right in and ask Haut what had happened back in 1947. He seemed disappointed with my choice of conversation topic.

'I never saw the wreckage myself,' he began wearily, before going on to reiterate the account I'd read so many times: Haut had been given the order to release the story by his commanding officer, and then ordered to deny it straight afterwards. 'We received calls from all over the world,' he recalled fondly. 'As far as Hong Kong, even. But not Melbourne, Australia,' he added, chuckling phlegmatically.

Haut's answer had a ritualised, practised air to it. But how could it not – he'd been answering this question all his life. Moreover, I was asking him about events that had occurred in 1947, over *half a century* before our current conversation. How little was remembered history and how much reconstructed story, I could not tell.

I changed tack. 'What do you think happened here?' I asked. 'What do you think the Air Force recovered from the crash site?'

Haut considered this for a moment. 'Well, they said it was a weather balloon,' he replied slowly. 'And then in 1997 they came out and said it was a high-altitude balloon for spying on the Soviets.'

'But what do you think it was?' I insisted. I pulled out my copy of *The Roswell Incident* and showed Haut the photo of Jesse Marcel in Brigadier-General Ramey's office, kneeling before the shiny material recovered from the site.

Haut shook his head, as if to clear conflicting thoughts. 'I don't rightly know,' he admitted at last. 'But I don't believe it was what the Air Force said it was. Not that they didn't have good reason to keep secrets. We were testing a lot of new aircraft in New Mexico back then, you see. We had bases all around

hereabouts – still do, although the Roswell base shut down some years ago.'

'Are you saying it was some kind of top secret test aircraft that crashed?' I asked.

'Could've been,' Haut replied, looking past me towards the door of his office for a moment, hoping perhaps that his assistant would come extricate him from this situation. 'But Glenn Dennis, who was the mortician in Roswell back then, swears he knew the nurse who saw the body of one of the little men taken from the crash – and that it wasn't human.'

'So you think it was extraterrestrial?'

Haut raised his right hand over his chest – no, over his heart, as if about to take an oath. 'I cannot say either way. I was just the PIO here at Roswell, following orders given me by my commanding officer.'

'Then what's all this? Why the Museum?'

'Because I think there is something out there,' he replied mildly. 'Even if what we took back from the crash site was a weather balloon or a secret weapon, it got people thinking – is there life on other planets? Are they coming here? That's why we've got this Museum.'

We moved on to talk about Haut's time in the Army. I wanted to know if he felt pressured to resign after leaking news of the Incident. Haut surprised me by launching into a spirited defence of the US Army. There was real fire in his eyes, and if his responses about the UFO crash seemed practised, then his loyalty to the Army, especially his former commanding officer Colonel Blanchard, was something Haut truly believed in.

'Colonel Blanchard was a great man,' Haut was saying, sitting straighter in the chair and looking me directly in the eye. 'I won't hear anything bad said about that man.'

I quickly assured him that I meant in no way to impugn Blanchard's reputation. I was just going on what I'd read.

'Don't believe everything you read, young man,' Haut counselled sternly and with conviction, as if he were the first to utter those words. 'Colonel Blanchard always treated me right. It was on his command that I released the information we had about the saucer, and on his command that I retracted it.'

'Where do you think Colonel Blanchard received his orders?' I ventured carefully.

'The Colonel was the ranking officer at the base,' Haut affirmed. 'I imagine he issued the orders himself. I was only a First Lieutenant at the time; if Colonel Blanchard was acting under higher orders I would not know anything about that.' Haut leaned back into his chair, a stubborn line to his jaw coming into profile. His body language said, *don't push this any further, punk*.

I pulled back a little. 'Okay. What about Major Marcel? Did he ever speak to you about the crash site?'

Haut rolled his eyes as if to say, *why would he have done that?* 'Jesse got most of the attention back in '47,' Haut explained. 'The rancher who found the wreckage, "Mac" Brazel, he didn't much care for publicity. Jesse did most of the talking at the press conference and then in 1978 too, when those first investigators came to Roswell. Jesse liked all the attention just a little too much, if you ask me.' I noted the irony that Haut was at that moment talking to me about Marcel, years after the other man's death.

An hour had passed and Haut, who at a guess was at least five times my age (well, make that a bad guess), was showing signs of tiring. His stories devolved into rambling accounts of his adventures as an enlisted man, memories for which he clearly showed more nostalgia than an unproven flying saucer crash that he personally had little to do with. The Roswell Incident was just a passing moment in Haut's life; it struck me that his

present commitment to ufology was something picked up later in life, when he was trying to make sense of his involvement in the highly strange epic. The Roswell Incident was an event he was still trying to remember – not because of senility, you understand, but because he literally hadn't been there. The truth of the Roswell Incident was almost as far removed from Haut as it was from me.

And yet . . . my feeling that Haut was concealing something from me may have been justified after all. Haut died in 2005, aged eighty-three. In 2007 an affidavit surfaced, apparently signed by Haut, in which he admitted that his commanding officer, Colonel Blanchard, showed him the retrieved saucer and alien corpses in a hangar at the Roswell Army Air Force Base. Blanchard made the younger man swear on his personal honour not to reveal what he knew until after both men's deaths. Since the appearance of the affidavit, nuts-and-bolts ufology has been engaged in a vicious melee to determine the authenticity of Haut's statement; as usual, I sit back louche and loose on the sidelines, waiting for the dust to settle. Whatever the actual truth, Haut's parting shot from beyond the grave is in keeping with the image of himself I believe he cherished most: not the ufologist Haut had latterly become, but rather the United States Army officer he had once been.

Eventually Haut's assistant returned. Haut pleaded another appointment and we made our goodbyes. I trudged back to my hotel room, where I watched cable television and ate cold spaghetti from a tin, feeling vaguely disappointed with the whole Roswell experience. My sentiment only deepened the following day, when I resolved to take a tour out to the crash site in the hope of feeling some kind of material connection with what was meant to have happened in Roswell.

Brazel's property was still privately owned, and the new ranchers charged visitors a small fee to walk around the crash site. They'd even erected a monument in honour of the aliens who died in the accident, inscribed with these moving words:

We Don't Know Who They Were
We Don't Know Why They Came
We Only Know
They Changed Our View
Of the Universe
This Universal Sacred Site
Is Dedicated July 1997
To the Beings
Who Met Their Destiny
Near Roswell New Mexico July 1947

When the cab arrived, the driver, a bored fellow who clearly had great difficulty understanding my accent, told me the site was closed. 'It's winter, not many tourists around here when it's cold, pal,' he informed me. I called the Museum, and they confirmed the news – in fact, the site was closed indefinitely to visitors.

'Can you get close to it from the road?' I asked the driver. He shrugged. 'Close enough,' he replied, 'but there's nothing to see. Look, you want this ride or not? I'm working, y'know.'

'Just take me out in the general direction of the crash site,' I finally said. The driver shrugged again. 'It's your money,' he pointed out, thus helping me arrive at the decision not to leave a tip.

We drove out across flat sagebrush plains. There were low ranges to the north of the town, but we wouldn't be going that far. In some versions of the Roswell story, I recalled, the saucer came to ground in those hills; in other versions, it was over four

hundred kilometres to the west. I would be visiting only one of several possible crash sites.

'We're getting close to the ranch, buddy,' my taxi driver drawled over his shoulder. 'Let me know how much further you wanna go.'

I'd reached a decision. 'Stop the car,' I said. 'This is far enough.'

I got out and stood on the side of the road. The driver leaned out of his window but showed no sign of joining me. 'You've been to the crash site?' I asked him.

'Sure,' he offered, minimally.

'What's out there?'

'Nothing,' he said. 'Flat plains. Scrub. Bushes. Like this,' and he waved a hand around to encompass the blunt and fallow New Mexico landscape that surrounded us.

And I knew there was no point in going on, for there was literally nothing ufological left in Roswell.

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4

NEW MEXICO TO NEVADA:
SECRET BASES, REAL POWER

I guess the past is always decaying, a half-life measured in mere minutes. All that's left to us are the stories we tell. Look at what happened with the Roswell saga, which was born in the words of Haut's press release and laid to rest by his superiors, only to be resurrected thirty years later by the investigative efforts of ufologists.

But the problem with UFOs is that they barely exist even when starring in their own stories. Take Roswell again. Where does a UFO appear in all this? If by 'UFO' you mean an extraterrestrial spacecraft, then the answer is: it doesn't appear, except in the theories offered by ufologists to explain the event retroactively. Although some witnesses say they saw a bright object shooting across the night skies of New Mexico in July 1947, nobody saw the crash itself – not 'Mac' Brazel, on whose land the debris was found, not Major Jesse Marcel, who knew the difference (for what it's worth) between a weather balloon and something he couldn't identify, and certainly not Lieutenant Walter Haut, who was only following orders. Strictly speaking, there is no flying saucer in the story at all, just the debris with strange physical

properties recovered from Brazel's ranch, objects which stand out as inert pieces of a reality that the protagonists in this story cannot understand.

That includes myself. When I say there was no saucer in the Roswell story, I don't necessarily mean to debunk ufology's claims on the grounds of lack of evidence. For all I know, the body armour and night vision goggles that US troops are using in Iraq and Afghanistan may actually be modelled, however clumsily, on the supertechnology of an alien race. But that's just hedging my bets. Instead, right from the beginning of the Roswell saga the thing that everybody's been fighting over – the UFO itself – has never really existed in a symbolic sense. It's a gap in the story, a vacant exhibit in the museum on Main Street, an empty field in the middle of the sagebrush country. The Roswell UFO doesn't exist but it is *real*, and it comes shooting over the horizon of our expectations to infuse this mundane, sublunar world with new and unthought-of possibilities.

Ufologists, however, know why there's no spacecraft or aliens in Roswell. Most say that the US Army secretly transported the crashed saucer to White Sands Missile Range, where it was back-engineered by US Army scientists alongside the recently acquired German V-2 rockets. White Sands was only a few hours from Roswell, some two hundred kilometres west as the ballistic missile flies. I caught a bus at dawn.

The highway started out across the same flat, sheep-ranching country that I was so heartily sick of, but mercifully soon began climbing through a brown and sere terrain of domed hills rising to higher, jagged peaks. We climbed higher still; at Ruidoso fresh snow weighed down the pines that crowded the upper slopes. Finally the panting Greyhound crossed the divide and I looked down into the forbidding landscape of central New Mexico. On the horizon the purpling ranges of the San Andres

Mountains threw up vicious spikes, splitting the state down the middle like a row of broken nails. At the mountains' foot a magnesium-bright expanse of gypsum waves broke against the parched desert floor – the White Sands National Monument, over seven hundred square kilometres of perfectly white sand dunes in search of a sea.

My base here was the town of Alamogordo ('fat cottonwood tree' in Spanish), a singularly sullen and uninviting place. After a few lonely trips to the local convenience store, I realised that even the tumbleweeds blew *around* the town rather than pass through it.

I chose my hotel for its proximity to the bus terminal. It certainly wasn't for its architectural value, a kind of dreary mock-adobe – which I'll call 'madobe' – made from sprayed-on concrete painted carnation peach. In my sparsely appointed room I glumly watched the TV news as the national terror alert climbed from yellow to orange. It wouldn't do to be colour-blind in the United States right now, less than six months after 9/11, I reflected.

The importance of the White Sands Missile Range in the history of America's rise to global superpower cannot be overstated. The site itself is enormous – over eight thousand square kilometres, five times the size of Rhode Island, the smallest state in the Union (and one of the friendliest, I might add). A large part of the Range falls within the cheerfully named Jornada del Muerte, the 'Route of the Dead Man,' one of the harshest landscapes in the North American continent. Aside from merrily shooting off the V-2s recovered from Germany, the United States detonated the first atomic bomb at the infamous Trinity site, a super-secret annex of White Sands, on 16 July 1945, less than two weeks before the first V-2s arrived. Since the 1980s it's also

been the backup landing strip for the Space Shuttle. Most *countries* don't have this much history.

My mission here was to visit the Range's aerospace museum. I wanted to compare the official story of how the V-2 missiles were brought to America with the findings of my research, which drew intriguing parallels with conspiracy theories explaining what happened to the crashed Roswell flying saucer after it was captured by the US Air Force.

Regrettably, I hadn't counted on the continuing fallout of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Along with the increased security checks at airports, all installations in America's national security network – which in New Mexico included practically everything on federal land except the Indian casinos – were completely out of bounds for anyone with less than Illuminati-level security clearance. Well, I guess it was historically accurate – in the 1950s I certainly wouldn't have been allowed on the Range to see the V-2s either.

I consoled myself by walking to the New Mexico Museum of Space History instead, a three-kilometre hike from my madobe hotel through thickets of new suburban housing lots that already had the look and feel of Potemkin ghost towns. The final stretch of road to the Museum climbed through almost untouched native scrub, filled with the scrabbling of lizards and the chatter of small birds. In New Mexico the quiet of the desert never seemed too far away from the concrete and asphalt of the sparsely populated towns, reminding me of Australia in the way that so much of it seemed to have been built just yesterday, despite the state having one of the longest histories in the Union.

In contrast to the modest premises of its ufological counterpart in Roswell, Alamogordo's Museum of Space History was a gleaming golden cube six storeys high. In front of the building an open-air exhibit featuring missiles tested at White Sands

bristled like a huge and outlandish cactus garden. Ironically, the rockets pointed their blunt noses back in the direction of White Sands, whereas in real life the V-2s were always fired *out* of the testing range.

Sadly there were no V-2s in the Museum. I sat a while in the missile-garden and ate the meagre sandwiches I had packed earlier that morning, gazing out towards White Sands itself, which could be seen shimmering in the distance. These sparkling rows of pure white dunes have featured in so many films they could be thought of as a more fully eroded Monument Valley. The celebrated extraterrestrial and pop singer David Bowie crash-landed here in the 1976 cult movie *The Man Who Fell to Earth*, and in 2009 it provided the battlefield where the US Army fought off an invasion of evil shape-changing alien robots in *Transformers II*. Perhaps some conspiracy theorists believe this clandestine engagement actually happened.

White Sands has proved such a versatile film setting perhaps because of its very blankness, a vast and empty *tabula rasa* upon which countless scenarios can be acted out. But it strikes me that not enough people know of the very real drama that occurred here at the end of World War II. Let me tell you, then, how the V-2s were brought to White Sands, and how they became the model for conspiracy theories that claim the US government secretly back-engineered the Roswell saucer.

One of the basic articles of faith of nuts-and-bolts ufology is that flying saucers represent a highly advanced alien technology light years ahead of Earth's. A similar myth was often attributed to the so-called Nazi 'superweapons' of World War II. When the first reports came in that London was under attack by fourteen-metre-tall ballistic missiles they were dismissed as fabrications, for up until then rockets belonged to one place and one place only: science fiction. This reaction was perhaps not surprising,

given that in 1944 the largest missiles in the British arsenal were a mere *five inches* long.

After seeing the devastating effectiveness of the V-2, the United States resolved to capture as many German rockets as it could before the British or the French or, more worrying, the Russians did. In anticipation, White Sands was set aside as a top-secret test site in late 1944 to secure the spoils of war.

In fact, rockets had been used in war for years. They appear, for instance, in the darkly prophetic words of the United States' national anthem describing the Royal Navy's bombardment of Baltimore during the War of 1812 ('*And the rockets' red glare . . . la la la in air*'). But missiles such as these had barely evolved beyond the stage of particularly dangerous fireworks, a technology pioneered in China as far back as the twelfth century. It would be in Germany that the truest, most terrifying potential of rocketry was realised. The birth of modern rocket science can be largely put down to one man: the charismatic and very possibly amoral, if not actually sociopathic, Wernher von Braun.

Barely a pimply teenager when he first began building rockets in old factories and warehouses around Berlin, von Braun was a geek in the truest sense. He never seemed to care who he worked for, nor to what use his rockets were put, just as long as he got the funds and resources to keep building them. It was in this way that von Braun's early plans for the V-2 were taken up by the German Army in 1932, precisely because it slipped through a loophole in the Treaty of Versailles that failed to mention rockets as a form of 'artillery'.

Between 1937 and 1942 the remote fishing village of Peenemünde on the Baltic Sea hosted a colony of five thousand engineers and scientists working on the world's first missile program. When a massive RAF bombing raid in August 1943 forced the plant to relocate to the more secure Mittelwerk

caverns deep beneath the Harz Mountains, inmates of a nearby concentration camp were pressed into the stepped-up production of V-2 missiles. Von Braun and his team raced to bring the V-2 online before the tide of war changed, but history was moving against them.

In January 1945 the German scientists learnt that the Red Army was only days away from overrunning the base. Deciding that the United States would make a better postwar master than the Soviets, the tightly knit team fled to a part of Germany already occupied by the Americans, where they offered the US Army their surrender – and their quite unreproducible services.

The codename 'V-2' stood for *Vergeltungswaffe 2*, or 'Vengeance Weapon 2' – if its story were made into a Hollywood blockbuster I'd imagine the tagline to be something like *V-2: Vengeance is Ours!* (There could even be a prequel about the V-2's jet-propelled predecessor, *V-1: Attack of the Buzzbombs!*) As the first of the Allies to reach the V-2 factories, the US Army indiscriminately looted the subterranean Mittelwerk plant. Von Braun and a further one hundred and seventeen German scientists were also transported under arrest to the States under the top-secret and legally ill-defined Operation Paperclip.

After a period of virtual detention in New Mexico, many of them would become US citizens. Most famously, von Braun would eventually rise to international celebrity, starring in Walt Disney's *World of Tomorrow* television series and ultimately designing the Saturn V moon rocket, his crowning achievement. Upon arrival in the United States in 1945, however, the German rocket team was put to work assembling and firing V-2s at White Sands, where sixty-seven launches (and crashes – designed for destruction, the missiles had no inbuilt landing system) took place between 1946 and 1952.

The V-2s' alluringly cinematic spoils-of-war saga proved irresistible to nuts-and-bolts ufologists, who were convinced that the crashed Roswell saucer had suffered a similar fate. In fact, one sub-branch of ufology maintains that UFOs were never extraterrestrial in the first place, but were built by fugitive Nazis operating from a secret base hidden variously in Greenland, Antarctica or the unknown realms lying within the Hollow Earth. (Hollow Earthers are kissing cousins to Flat Earthers; believers claim there are openings at both the North and South Poles and a small sun floating at the exact centre of the planet, bathing the happy lands of the interior in perpetual golden rays.)

But the clincher for me is that both the V-2 missile and the Roswell saucer back-engineerings were set in the Old West, the former frontier that in the 1950s had become a Cold War milieu of top-secret bases and remote crash sites. Echoing the cowboy lifestyle of characters like 'Mac' Brazel, the scientists, engineers and military men who back-engineered the V-2s lived on the rugged, largely women-less home on the (missile) range for months at a time, spending their infrequent leave in old border and cattle towns with evocative names like Fort Worth, Fort Bliss or El Paso. As one historian has put it, 'GIs in jeeps bounding over the desert dunes to the crash sites were likened to cowboys rounding up cattle.' It seems to me that American ufology owes as much to John Wayne as it does to Kenneth Arnold.

Crucial as White Sands is to the lore of nuts-and-bolts ufology, it may not be the final resting place of the Roswell flying saucer. Many ufologists believe that the saucer was transported further west again, to a secret base in one of the remotest regions of the United States known as Area 51. Despite its near-mythical

reputation, this is a real place, although you won't find it on any road maps. Just as White Sands was integral to US national security in the 1940s and '50s, Area 51 (part of the enormous Nevada Test and Training Range as it's officially known) played a central role during the 1980s in the development of another secret weapon that ufologists have been eager to claim as their own.

With the aerospace museum inside White Sands likely to stay closed for years to come – at least judging by the terror alert on the television, which had climbed to a lurid shade resembling the exterior of my madobe hotel – there was little more I could do in Alamogordo. My research having suffered somewhat of a blow, in a low mood I retraced the desert highway to Albuquerque to catch my connecting flights to Nevada.

Las Vegas had the closest airport to Area 51, but the city may as well have been a planet of its own. Appalled by the coruscating banality of casinos that were so large they could probably be seen from the moon, I booked another bus to central Nevada.

In comparison to the country I was now crossing, New Mexico felt overpopulated. Nevada is the outback of the United States; outside the urban centres of Las Vegas and Reno the state is basically empty, its red earth vistas stretching forever. Yucca trees, wild asses, ghost towns where even the ghosts have gotten lonely and moved on to larger towns to find work – the Greyhound coach passed through Nevada like a cursed tour bus in a never-ending Eagles song. The only other places in the world that match the desolation and emptiness of Nevada in my experience are Patagonia in deep winter and the City of London after dark, when all the traders have gone home to Surrey.

Area 51 is hidden in the emptiest quarter of this empty state. What a perfect place for a secret base. Even if you make it to the site perimeter – which is many, many kilometres in circumference and set far back from the core of the facility – the off-limits zone

is subject to the strictest scrutiny. Many are the tales of implacable security guards intercepting and escorting away over-eager ufologists at gunpoint. Before leaving for the States I remember joking with Ken that I should get myself arrested to see what was inside Area 51. I think he took me seriously.

My base of operations was the small town of Tonopah, about one hundred kilometres north-east of the testing range but close enough to its airspace for the locals to get a front row view of the new aircraft *not* being developed inside the secret base (which doesn't exist). Some two thousand metres high (in the States, that's about seven thousand feet) and with about the same number of inhabitants, Tonopah wasn't quite a ghost town, but it was the sort of place where every postcard featured the same picture – the poppet heads of the old gold mine on the hill at sunset – for the simple reason that there was so little else to photograph.

I'd come to Tonopah because in the late 1980s it was the scene of a spate of UFO sightings, or what ufologists might call a minor 'flap' (a term borrowed from US military jargon meaning a situation of uncontrolled confusion and excitement – a description apt, perhaps, for the endeavour of ufology in general). What was interesting about Tonopah was that on this occasion the witnesses actually *did* see what they thought they saw, and the US government actually did confess to a cover-up.

The UFO in question was a secret weapon like nothing the world had seen, literally. Flitting in and out of enemy airspace, it has since brought the American superpower's hegemony on black wings across the globe to Kuwait, Iraq, Afghanistan. This UFO turned out to be the very real F117 stealth bomber, one of the most closely guarded secret weapons technologies in US history.

On Tonopah's single road (follow it north and you'll eventually end up in Reno), there's a monument commemorating the first confirmed sighting of the stealth bomber. This is the most appropriate and revealing way of looking at the sudden appearance of the stealth bomber – pretending for a moment that it was a UFO. What the US government has yet to disclose – the one concession that would finally make ufologists' fantasies become reality – is whether the stealth bomber was back-engineered from the technology salvaged from the Roswell saucer.

For something to do other than watch television in yet another depressing hotel room, I took a walk up to the poppet heads on the hill above town, which had since been incorporated into the Tonopah Historic Mining Park. Due to the altitude, I noted with some interest that climbing the small hill felt like I was being subjected to a cruel optical illusion: the incline had suddenly tilted a few degrees steeper, despite appearing unaltered to the naked eye. This was the first time I had experienced the effects of high altitude, although it only presaged the much higher elevations I would encounter in the Andes – but of course I didn't know that at the time.

A bitter wind scoured the grounds of the Historic Mining Park, which revealed itself to be little more than an exposed hilltop studded with stamping presses rusted into immobility, disintegrating wooden carts and other salvaged paraphernalia of the nineteenth-century frontier. Broken desert basins cloaked in yucca trees and cacti encircled the tiny township, and in the distance snow-capped mountains stretched across the horizon far to the west in California. The view was magisterial in the wan sunlight of winter, but it was simply too cold to savour for more than a few minutes. I sought shelter inside the low building that served as a small museum.

Yet another museum in a desert town in America, I thought to myself . . . but just as I had met the friendly ufologist lady in Roswell, in Tonopah I got to talking with Bob, a volunteer worker at the Historic Mining Park and the only other person present in the complex that day. Bob was perhaps sixty years old and sported a neat grey goatee but not a single hair on his head. He loved the idea that I was doing a PhD on UFOs.

'If my boys were in town, I'd close up shop right now and we'd head straight up Highway 375,' he told me. 'Highway 375 was renamed "The Extraterrestrial Highway", did you know that? I guess you did. Anyway, there's a hill up 'round that way where you can see straight into Area 51 and the Groom Lake facility. Sure you can't stay another week 'til my boys get back from their hunting trip?'

I assured him I couldn't. And yet I wasn't overly disappointed; I had a feeling all we'd see would be more rust-coloured ranges and dusty lakebeds. Bob confirmed this.

'That's right,' he enthused. 'Not much to see in Area 51 – not above ground, anyway.'

I asked Bob if he'd ever seen anything strange in the skies in this part of Nevada.

'Sure I have,' he replied with some pride. 'The Nevada range is the largest testing facility in the country, did you know that? Oh, you did. Well I guess it's your business to investigate these things. Of course you and I won't know what they *really* got up there until years later, but that's how it works, I guess.'

But the stealth bomber was different, I pointed out. People did see that; there were witnesses. Bob nodded again.

'Saw the stealth bomber myself, ten, fifteen years ago now,' he said.

'What did you think it was?' And then, unable to stop myself prompting him, I asked, 'Did you think it was a UFO?'

A wide grin split Bob's open and amiable countenance. 'Kinda the same thing,' he laughed. 'UFO or secret test aircraft – take your pick! We guessed the big black planes were ours, but until it was official nobody really knew. Could've been one of theirs, for all we knew,' and he pointed straight up to the sky, leading me to think he wasn't talking about the Soviets.

'Do you think there's an alien spacecraft kept under wraps in Area 51?' I now asked. Bob shrugged.

'Perhaps there was – once. You hear rumours that whatever they had in storage at Groom Lake was flown out to another, *more* top-secret base.'

I raised an eyebrow. 'And where's this other base?'

'Utah,' Bob answered with every display of confidence. 'The real top-secret stuff all got moved out to Utah some time back in the late '80s or early '90s, once the stealth bomber came online. I've heard tell there's a secret flight out of Vegas every day that never shows up on the ATC or CAA reports, a plain, white Boeing 747 with no markings and no windows 'cept the cockpit. That's the supply plane, flying out to Utah where the government's working on the *next* stage of back-engineering.'

Because the presence of high strangeness must be kept out of sight, I thought to myself, constantly moving to a more desolate, more remote location lest it destabilise the fabric of reality. *I must write this conversation down*, I also thought, but Bob had moved on to other matters.

'Australia, eh? Always wanted to see the Outback. All that open space to really breathe.'

'You know,' I said, 'the Outback is actually pretty much like Nevada. Except warmer.'

Bob looked amazed. 'You don't say!' he exclaimed.

I returned to the hotel that night feeling like the crudely lashed together raft of my research in the United States had

drifted far off its original course. Certainly, I no longer harboured a desire to get closer to the top-secret test range than I already was. Watching Area 51 for signs of clandestine activity would be like waiting for actors to walk onstage from five kilometres away: too far away to tell if anybody's actually there, so you make up your own play instead. This is exactly what ufology has done – since the 1950s ufologists have been watching the blank spaces of New Mexico and Nevada (and now Utah, it seemed) while fantasising about the (super)power lying dormant in the recovered alien technology.

'If American scientists and engineers can learn the source of the space ships' power and adapt it to our use, it may well be the means to ending the threat of war.' That was nuts-and-bolts pioneer Donald Keyhoe in 1949. A generation later, Friedman and Moore suggested in *The Roswell Incident* that it would be understandable if the US government kept the Roswell technology top secret, since 'an increasing number of foreign nations would wish to obtain what could perhaps be the ultimate secret weapon.'

Since Roswell returned to the spotlight of ufology, conspiracy theories about the wreckage recovered from 'Mac' Brazel's ranch have grown into elaborate alternative histories that purport to tell the real story of the rise of the US superpower. According to the aptly named 'Dark Side' branch of UFO conspiracy theories, for instance, in the late 1940s the United States and its new allies, the former-Nazi scientists under Wernher von Braun, signed a treaty with the extraterrestrials agreeing to establish secret bases in the desert where the two superpowers (the United States and the aliens, that is) could collaborate on Orwellian big science projects – the more macabre the better, usually involving horrific bio-experiments on thousands of abducted American citizens held prisoner in underground concentration camps. However,

the aliens soon reneged on their word, resulting in open conflict between America and the extraterrestrials.

America's somewhat quixotic 'victory' over the Soviet Union since its collapse in 1989 – in some circles considered a great anticlimax, as not one of the thousands of lovingly stockpiled missiles, descendants of the captured V-2s, were ever fired in anger – has only provided more plotlines. Dark Side conspiracy theories claim that weapons technologies like the stealth bomber and the Star Wars defence initiative were developed to counter the alien menace rather than deter the Soviets, making the Cold War a mere sideshow in the *real* struggle against the unseen extraterrestrials. In fact, according to some conspiracy theorists the Cold War was brought to an end only because Reagan magnanimously agreed to share Star Wars with Gorbachev, thus protecting the USSR against the aliens as well. So that's what perestroika and glasnost were all about!

But you don't have to be a ufologist to believe in America's destiny as defender of the Free World. The dissolution of political differences in the face of a common extraterrestrial enemy is another long-standing fantasy with politically conservative and rather apocalyptic overtones, a scenario which has been taken out of its ufological context and 'back-engineered' in turn by the same national and military authorities that usually debunk UFOs. For example, General Douglas MacArthur, the Supreme Allied Commander during World War II, suggested in an address given at West Point in 1962 that America's 'thrust into outer space' could mean that the next 'world war' might be fought as the 'ultimate conflict between a united human race and the sinister forces of some other planetary galaxy . . .'

Even more absurdly – and this is bordering on situationist comedy – in 1987 US President Ronald Reagan expressed similar sentiments before the 42nd General Assembly of the United

Nations. 'In our obsession with antagonisms of the moment, we often forget how much unites all the members of humanity,' he began, employing a rhetoric of equality no doubt familiar to the UN delegates gathered. Reagan's concept of equality, however, was based upon the imminent threat of extraterrestrial invasion rather than anything as abstract as human rights. 'Perhaps we need some outside, universal threat to make us recognise this common bond,' he continued, admitting that he would 'occasionally think how quickly our differences worldwide would vanish if we were facing an alien threat from outside this world. And yet, I ask, is not this alien force already among us?' Crikey!

Throughout all this secret history of UFOs in America, nuts-and-bolts ufology has been attempting to back-engineer *itself* into the United States' rise as a global superpower. How could one nation come to dominate an entire planet? Only with help from beyond this world, ufologists seem to be saying. These true believers desperately want to be part of this great saga, inserting the crashed alien supertechnology into the cracks of history, claiming credit where they feel it has been denied. A bit like the computer generated images of Forrest Gump meeting all the US presidents since the 1950s, only even creepier.

And yet what were these alien objects that have supposedly shaped the outcome of so many people's lives? Hidden in the emptiest parts of the map, these objects only exist in their far-reaching effects, like the ripples on the surface of a pond after the stone has sunk to the bottom, forever out of reach.

Back-engineering is ufology's equivalent of a coupling constant. I've taken this idea from particle physics, where a coupling constant is the mathematical representation of the strength of interaction between two particles, and may be thought of as the creation of a new particle in its own right. Scientifically speaking, this is still a 'hit-and-miss' description – observations

are made when two particles collide in the highly strange space inside the innards of a particle accelerator. When it comes to back-engineering, it is the blank little objects that crashed to earth at Roswell that undergo invisible and hidden transformations to become stealth bombers, Star Wars, Kevlar and the rest. Arcing across the Cold War years, back-engineering is an attempt to tame the encounter with high strangeness, and nothing else.

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5

THE CONTACTEES:
FROM ONE WORLD TO THE NEXT

A deep and abiding sense of disappointment settled over me as I considered my options in Tonopah. After travelling so far and so wide to see the hallowed grounds of ufology, I felt I was owed something more than the dusty memories of Roswell or the fearsome repudiation of Area 51. I hadn't gone to the United States to see a UFO, no, but I began to wonder if I was falling prey to one of the few real dangers of having read too much. Sometimes the page preserves, with almost deliberate cruelty it seems, the fullness of a scene, a place, a reality even, untouched by what otherwise must fade from sight – and now nothing I saw in my travels across New Mexico and Nevada was living up to the tall tales of aliens in America I'd read back in Melbourne. In Tonopah, this relic of a lost century that dwindled further into the dust with each passing day, I felt for the first time the cold grip of isolation that would dog my research into the world of ufology.

Nuts-and-bolts ufologists never did prove the existence of UFOs. And yet . . . they were not alone. In the 1950s their greatest rivals in the search for the Truth were a motley bunch

of mystics, charlatans, false professors and self-appointed gurus known collectively as the contactees.

Tonopah was not far from the border with California, once home to more contactees per square mile than any other state in the Union. Despite the disillusionment I felt, I could yet still follow my original plan and make my way to California to see what traces remained, if any, of the major contactee sites there. Unable to come to a decision, I took out my notes and went over what I knew about the contactees for yet another time.

Contactees are cool. In fact, they're preposterous. Collectively they believed many impossible things, but they were never more spectacularly and utterly wrong than when they claimed that planets as close as Venus, Mars and the still undiscovered world of Clarion (supposedly just out of sight on the far side of the Moon) were home to millions of friendly aliens called space brothers: tall, blonde, humanoid extraterrestrials that looked remarkably like Scandinavian ski instructors. Despite having a lot to say, the space brothers proved rather media-shy and chose to communicate through a select few human spokespersons – hence the name, contactees.

Sadly, the space brothers' cosmic love-in came to a screeching halt with the launch of the Soviet Union's Luna 3 spacecraft in 1959, which took the first photographs of the far side of the Moon and therefore destroyed contactee claims that it was covered in cool pine forests and pristine lakes (again, sounding very Scandinavian – I bet the space brothers would have made excellent interior designers). Venus, Mars, Jupiter and the rest of the Solar System followed suit, each planet coming out more inimical to life than the last. The news was even worse for the

good folk of Clarion, whose utopian little planet simply didn't exist at all.

But the contactees didn't let the advance of science get them down for long. The spiritual heirs of the contactee super-gurus of the 1950s are among us yet, still causing a ruckus. In March 1997 thirty-eight members of the Heaven's Gate UFO cult, believing it was time to leave their bodies before the Earth was 'recycled' in a planetary cataclysm, downed a once-in-a-lifetime cocktail of vodka spiked with phenobarbital, a drug recommended by the World Health Organization for the treatment of epilepsy but when taken in large doses perfect for ritualistic mass suicide. Less morbid but just as controversial are the free love-loving Raelians, followers of former French racing car driver Claude 'Rael' Vorilhon, who shocked the world with their claims – unsubstantiated, as it turned out – of cloning the first human in 2003.

I've met a few latter-day contactees myself. Most are into yoga and some have written books about their journeys to other planets, all of which are now a long, long way from Earth.

But like everything I was discovering about ufology, there was another side to the contactees. If you look beyond the sci-fi fantasies and New Age silliness, a window into history opens. Through this portal shines the rich and otherworldly glow of theosophy, a sort of Hinduism-meets-the-Freemasons super-religion invented in the nineteenth century by the bug-eyed Russian mystic Madame Blavatsky (who still lives in the rundown house at the end of my street and frightens the local possums). Theosophy was the grandmother of all twentieth-century esoteric movements – its ideas, beliefs, its very language would be recycled by the contactees in their attempts to make sense of UFOs.

None of this would be worth talking about, however, without the story of one misty-eyed, brylcreemed Polish-American guru

called George Adamski. If your moral fibre is easily frayed, I suggest skipping the next few pages.

George Adamski was born in Poland in 1891, but his family migrated to New York City in search of work (and perhaps fewer foreign invasions) when he was two years old. He appears to have led a somewhat aimless existence as a young man, making his way across the country in a succession of menial jobs: squirrel wrangler, Prohibition-era belly dancer, US cultural attaché to Texas (I made those up). For a while he served with the US Army and took part in the peacekeeping excursion into Mexico during that country's bloody and confused revolution – in those days 'weapons of mass destruction' wore handlebar moustaches and bandoliers and were called Pancho Villa.

Eventually Adamski washed up on the sunny shores of Southern California at a time when the theosophical movement was at its peak. He'd found his promised land, and would spend the rest of his life here. By 1941 he had assumed the title of 'Professor' and founded the 'Royal Order of Tibet', provoking the Dalai Lama to launch a vicious campaign of passive and peaceful aggression in an attempt to wrest back the brand. At the dawn of the UFO era Adamski was living in a trailer on the slopes of Mt Palomar near San Diego, where he made a modest living selling refreshments to the astronomers and tourists travelling to the Palomar Observatory, at that time the home of the world's largest telescope.

Adamski's world-changing encounter took place on a road-trip into the Mojave Desert on 20th November 1952. His companions included the 'Prescott Four' as I like to call them, fellow mystics who had recently established a theosophical retreat in Prescott, Arizona. 'Dr' George Hunt Williamson was their charismatic

leader; Williamson's wife Betty, and another married couple, Al Bailey and his wife, confusingly also called Betty, rounded off the group. Adamski left Mt Palomar in another car with two female colleagues: Alice K. Wells, sometime student of Adamski's and owner of the Palomar Gardens Café where he lived and worked, and Lucy McKinnis, described nebulously by Adamski as his 'secretary.'

The two parties drove deep into the Mojave. I can imagine Adamski scratching his brylcreemed head: where's a flying saucer when you need one?

But the aliens were always going to come to him, sooner or later. Adamski was, after all, a contactee, not a contactor. Shortly after midday a large, cigar-shaped UFO came into view over a nearby mountain range. I'll let Adamski tell the story in his own words:

> Excitedly, Dr Williamson exclaimed, 'Is that a space ship?'
>
> At first glance it looked like a fuselage of a very large ship with the sun's rays reflecting brightly from its unpainted sides, at an altitude and angle where wings might not be noticeable. Schooled in caution against over-excitement and quick conclusions, especially in regard to aircraft, Lucy replied, 'No, George, I don't believe it is.'
>
> 'But that baby's high! And see how big it is!' exclaimed Al.
>
> 'And Lucy! It doesn't have wings or any other appendages like our planes do!' persisted George. And turning to me, 'What do you think, Adamski?'

A smaller, saucer-shaped craft appeared a few moments later, passing out of sight between two nearby peaks. Adamski took seven photographs in quick succession of this UFO, which he later identified as a Venusian 'scout ship' (and which photographic

experts later identified as a *chicken incubator*, whatever that is, with portholes strategically painted on. A tricksy one, was old George).

Seemingly from nowhere, a human figure emerged from a ravine in the hills about quarter of a mile away. The man appeared quite normal except for two features:

> His trousers were not like mine. They were in a style, much like ski trousers and with a passing thought I wondered why he wore such out here in the desert.
>
> His hair was long, reaching to his shoulders, and was blowing in the wind as was mine. But this was not too strange for I have seen a number of men who wore their hair almost that long.

Adamski realised that he 'was in the presence of a man from outer space – A HUMAN BEING FROM ANOTHER WORLD!' (Adamski's capitals, not mine – he would've made a terrible emailer.) Four billion years of evolution, an entire universe of possibilities, and Earth's first alien visitor is given away by his haircut and dress sense.

Communicating through a mixture of hand gestures, pictures drawn in the sand and *mental telepathy*, the spaceman – whose name was revealed to be 'Orthon' in Adamski's second book, *Inside the Spaceships* – explained that he was from Venus. According to Orthon, all planetary bodies were inhabited by human beings, as the form was 'very much universal.' For Adamski, this revelation merely confirmed a belief he had held for many years, one that was, as we shall see, very much in line with his theosophical background.

Unfortunately, Orthon was the bearer of grim news. In what would become a central motif in contactee accounts, the Venusian told Adamski that he had come to Earth to warn against the dangers of nuclear weapons. He did this by forming the shape of

a mushroom cloud with his Venusian hands and making 'boom! boom!' noises.

But there was hope for the Earth and its self-absorbed, materialistic inhabitants. Even though it went against their strict policy of non-intervention, the space brothers had resolved to bring our planet back into the fold of the Universal Creator – and Adamski was to be their chosen mouthpiece on Earth.

Before leaving in his flying saucer, Orthon thoughtfully provided evidence of his momentous visit. Being an anthropologist, as Adamski somewhat cryptically explains, Williamson had thought to bring along some plaster of Paris, which he now used to take casts of Orthon's footprints in the sand (sceptics note: Williamson was not an anthropologist; in fact, he'd dropped out of his undergraduate studies at the University of Arizona the previous year). Later analysis by the two Georges – Adamski and Williamson – revealed that the soles of Orthon's shoes had been embossed with characters in 'Solex-Mal,' the forgotten, original language of humanity that was still spoken by space brothers on other planets.

Adamski's account was first serialised in *FATE* magazine, the same publication that had championed Kenneth Arnold five years previously. Eventually an expanded account was published in the bestselling *Flying Saucers Have Landed*, which Adamski co-authored with British theosophist and proto-ufologist Desmond Leslie. Much to the chagrin of sceptics and mainstream ufologists alike, the sixty-two-year-old Adamski became the most widely recognised ufologist in the world almost overnight.

Adamski had finally arrived in the role he had been born to play. Over the next thirteen years he travelled the globe extensively, his fame and notoriety often preceding him – in Holland he was invited to a private audience with Queen Juliana, whereas in Zurich outraged students pelted the stage with rotten fruit.

Although unsubstantiated by the Holy See, Adamski claimed Pope John XXIII as his most influential fan. 'He gave me His blessing, and I handed Him a message,' Adamski later revealed, showing anyone who'd care to see it an embossed gold medal commemorating his meeting with the ageing pontiff. To preserve Adamski's legacy after his death in 1965, his followers established the George Adamski Foundation, or GAF for short – named, I suppose, after the sound sceptics make in their oesophagus when trying to swallow Adamski's tales.

Flying Saucers Have Landed, Adamski's tell-all book, sold in the hundreds of thousands. When I look at Adamski's mug shot on the flyleaf of my own copy I'm reminded of the early days of my research in Melbourne when I would scour the second-hand bookshops of the city in search of rare and out of print ufological tomes. I came across a near-mint condition copy of Adamski's magnum opus in Syfer's Bookshop down in St Kilda, Melbourne's beachfront bohemian enclave and one-time red-light district. The original owner of the book had left this ghostly message on the inside cover: 'Please return to Esther Rofe, 43 Fitzwilliam St, Kew – Christmas, 1955.' Sorry, Esther and descendants, but the book was *mine* now.

Before a Rofe estate solicitor could leap out from behind a stack of 1970s Penguin Classics, I hurried over to Syfer himself, who sat behind his begrimed computer console like some kind of freeze-dried Jabba the Hutt. 'This book will aid my research, it's been very hard to track down,' I blurted out with excitement, hoping to initiate a scintillating discussion between two committed bibliophiles. Syfer's dead arthropod eyes barely flickered in my direction.

'Oh yeah,' he grunted as he entered the sale, 'this one keeps turning up every few years. But there's always someone to buy it,' he added morosely. Of course Syfer's cave of mouldering books is now a hemp fabric dress shop or wagyu burger grill with chrome and steel interiors, but gentrification was always a cruel and unusual blessing.

Adamski's account of gentle alien peace-niks can't be more different to the world-conquering dreams of nuts-and-bolts ufology. Although nuts-and-bolts ufologists believed in the existence of alien life *a priori*, they had fatally bound themselves to the scientific principles of empirical observation, meaning they had to wait for the Real Thing – the prophesised UFO sighting that would send sceptics scurrying back into the undergrowth. Dave and I saw this barely contained frustration at the VUFORS meeting in Melbourne, where every word, every piece of jittery body language, every poor fashion choice screamed to the heavens, 'We know you're up there! *Why don't you show yourselves?!?*'

Adamski, on the other hand, claimed casual, intimate contact with *human beings from other planets*. While nuts-and-bolts ufologists could only guess at the aliens' motives, Adamski knew exactly why the space brothers were here: to help humanity save itself from itself.

He may well have been a shyster and a grand charlatan, but Adamski didn't just make up his fanciful stories either. Adamski, Williamson, Leslie and many of the other major contactees of the 1950s were channelling the teachings, beliefs and cosmic fantasies of theosophy. 'Channelling' is the operative word here, for where the original nineteenth century theosophical movement adapted the table-knocking tricks of spiritualism for an age of progress that produced Darwin's theories of evolution, the contactees updated theosophy for the limitless horizons of the space age.

The original Theosophical Society was founded by Russian émigré Madame Helena Petrovna Blavatsky and Henry Steel Olcott in New York in 1875. The pair had met two years previously at a séance in Vermont, and by all accounts it was a case of (spiritual) love at first (in)sight. With her thyroid-enhanced eyes and romantically chequered past – at age seventeen she fled on horseback from an arranged marriage – Blavatsky was the über-guru Olcott had been waiting for. He in turn had the luxuriant muttonchop sideburns and society connections that were the prerequisites for influence and power in those days.

Between them, they turned the Theosophical Society into one of the most progressive (if also the kookiest) NGOs of the time. During its heyday between the 1870s and 1930s, theosophy was strongly associated with movements such as weapons disarmament, feminism and the push for independence in the Indian subcontinent – a major street in Sri Lanka's capital Colombo was named after Olcott, one of the first Westerners to adopt Buddhism, Sri Lanka's official religion, long before Richard Gere or MCA (aka Adam Yauch from the Beastie Boys) settled into the lotus position.

Right from the start theosophy was a many-headed hybrid. Blavatsky herself was especially influenced by Hinduism, from whose rich heritage she lifted the concept of reincarnation and the idea that spiritually advanced beings, variously known as Mahatmas, Adepts or *Brothers*, kept a watchful eye on the world.

Charles Darwin's theory of evolution was the other major inspiration for Blavatsky. In the late nineteenth century the fledgling disciplines of sociology and anthropology were busily adapting the new and startling theories of evolution to come up with social Darwinism, a charming way of looking at the world which suggested that certain races (non-Europeans), social classes (the poor) and genders (well, there were only two back then) were

not as highly evolved as others and so shouldn't be allowed to govern themselves, ask for better-paid jobs or vote (or all of the above, if you happened to be a poor African woman, but that goes without saying).

Not wanting to be left out, Blavatsky and the theosophists concocted what I like to think of as 'cosmic Darwinism.' Cue the theremin, please. Instead of limiting themselves to just life on Earth, cosmic Darwinism mapped an evolutionary scale of spiritual development onto a vast universe consisting of thousands of planets, each inhabitied by human beings much like ourselves. The cranky English naturalist's legacy is clearly visible in the theosophists' delirious vision of a universal 'tree' of spiritual being, each branch representing a more evolved consciousness than the one below. Sure, the nineteenth century had steam trains and lots of nice, neat telegraph poles (and it was just a matter of time before someone figured out how to make flying machines), but according to the theosophists we poor, deluded Earthlings sat somewhere just above the level of dim-witted amoebas but below that of particularly nasty nematodes. Reincarnation, rather than biological adaptation, was our only hope of ascending to a higher branch in the tree.

Carnival Spruiker: Step right up, ladies and gentlemen! A question for Madame B! You sir, in the smoking jacket and monocle, ask away sir, any question at all for Her High Spiritualness, Madame B!

[*Carnival spruiker smiles insanely while the Madame watches in impassive oracular silence.*]

Man with Monocle: Er, jolly good, old bean, but if all you say is true, one was wondering just how did we, as in the jolly human race, get here in the first place, as in the smashingly tip-top planet Earth?

The short answer is that the theosophical version of the Solar System was full of life at the turn of the century – and we 'Earthlings' came from outer space. In 1904 W. Scott-Elliot claimed in *The Lost Lemuria* (published by the Theosophical Publishing Society House in London) that Earth people had been created from mindless beasts by the Adepts, a race of benevolent aliens residing on the more spiritually advanced planet of, wouldn't you know it, *Venus*.

But earlier still, in 1886, American theosophist William J. Colville proposed that the sunken continent of Atlantis, the ultimate source of all human civilisations, had been colonised by a spiritually superior extraterrestrial race. 'Not only is this world a school, but all worlds are schools; not only is this world inhabited, but all worlds are inhabited in some period in their career,' Colville muses through his muttonchops.

Seventy years later, the contactees recycled theosophy's ideas without so much as a tip of the hat. Adamski in particular appears to have ripped off whole sections from Colville. 'For the greater part of my life I have believed that other planets are inhabited,' he says in *Flying Saucers Have Landed*. 'And I have pictured them as "class rooms" for our experience and development; as the "many mansions" of the vast universe.'

You'd think the contactees and nuts-and-bolts ufologists would be mortal enemies – and so they were. Contactees tended to view nuts-and-bolts ufology, with its sabre-rattling fantasies of world domination, as part of the problem that had brought the Earth to the brink of nuclear war. For their part, nuts-and-bolts ufologists feared the contactees were bringing the field into disrepute; with all these stories of free and easy alien contact, it made sitting in a paddock with binoculars suddenly seem a little foolish.

And yet, inevitably, the two camps had more in common than they cared to admit. The contactees were breezily indiscriminate in choosing their influences – just as they adapted theosophical ideas to explain why the space brothers were interested in Earth and its grubby little inhabitants, they also borrowed wholesale from their in-house rivals. Most strikingly, both contactees and their nuts-and-bolts opposites shared the same emotional landscape of the deserts and mountains of the American West.

California had long featured in theosophical fantasies as the future birthplace of the prophesised 'Pacific root race,' a chocolate-skinned, bongo-playing, peace-loving blend of all human peoples that would someday rise to global ascendancy. In search of this ideal, the contactees saw themselves as second-wave pioneers of the American frontier. A hundred years earlier the first settlers with their covered wagons and Winchester rifles overran the West and its indigenous peoples – the contactees were similarly embarked upon a Manifest Destiny, but one whose goal was the very soul of the planet. The relatively empty expanses of the western states became the distant shore of a 'New World' that, for the contactees, promised ufological freedom and liberty.

One of my absolute favourite UFO books from this period is Helen and Bryant Reeve's *Flying Saucer Pilgrimage*, a kind of *On the Road* for sputniks rather than beatniks (and in defence of that terrible joke, *sputnik* means 'traveller' in Russian, which describes the Reeves most accurately). Written in 1956 after returning from two years of research and 'Over 23,000 Miles Of Travel' (as the cover of the original edition boldly proclaims), with their horn-rimmed glasses and Eisenhower-era haircuts they seem an unlikely pair of UFO 'saucerers', as they preferred to be called. But that's what I love about the 1950s: even society's freaks looked like Presbyterian gym class teachers by today's standards.

It seems that the Reeves were living a fairly uneventful life in suburban Milwaukee until one day they looked up and really *saw* for the first time their all-American home with its modern interiors and modern labour-saving devices. Helen, always the more forthright of the pair, turns to her husband in a moment of unexpected epiphany and says, 'Bryant, honey, there's got to be more than *this*.' And so there was, but for the Reeves that something more were the little bits of nothing that are UFOs.

And so it was on one of their many journeys across the Western states that the Reeves met George van Tassel and his family at the much celebrated contactee centre of Giant Rock, a remote location in California's Mojave Desert which, if it were a movie set, might resemble *Mad Max 3: Beyond Thunderdome* meets *Little House on the Prairie*.

For the Reeves, van Tassel was the living embodiment of the straight-talking, independent frontiersman. 'Bronzed by the sun and desert air he had the unmistakable appearance of the vigorous out-door "pioneer" type,' Bryant recalled. 'As I gripped his hand, I experienced an unmistakable feeling of liking, of kinship with this man I had never seen before.'

'Van,' as he preferred to be known, had turned his back on the world to live with his family in the desert at Giant Rock, a seven-storey-high chunk of granite popularly referred to as 'the world's largest free-standing boulder' (a title it may have subsequently lost when a monster-truck-sized chunk of the boulder spontaneously calved from the mother lode in 2005. Thankfully, no monster trucks were harmed during this incident.)

Rumoured to be a Hopi sacred site, the 2600-acre property was leased from the US government in the 1930s to one Frank Critzer, a reclusive prospector who personified the rugged individualism of the Old West. Using dynamite, Critzer blasted living quarters from beneath the Rock, and in 1942 he used

dynamite again, this time to commit suicide during an armed standoff with sheriff's deputies investigating his alleged Nazi sympathies. When the van Tassels moved in five years later, the underground rooms still showed signs of the blast (including Critzer's blood-stains – a readymade feature wall, I guess), but within a few months they had installed electricity, opened a diner, restored the disused airstrip next to the Rock, and opened a dude ranch – and established telepathic communication with the space brothers, naturally.

Giant Rock soon emerged as the most famous of the contactee centres. In the 1950s and '60s its annual Spacecraft Conventions were great carnivalesque events where thousands of people gathered to hear major contactees like Adamski and van Tassel speak, where stories and sightings could be swapped, and books, photos, and souvenirs sold. Perhaps the most highly strange souvenir on sale at Giant Rock: a clipping of hair taken by contactee Buck Nelson from a 'Venusian sheep-dog'. What I wouldn't give to have been at Giant Rock in the 1950s . . . this is my personal Woodstock, ladies and gentlemen.

And yet there was more than just good old-fashioned chicanery and legerdemain taking place at Giant Rock. The 1950s saw the establishment across America of a network of installations needed to wage the Cold War: Air Force bases, missile ranges and, eventually, nuclear power plants. In response to this hard-wiring of the landscape into the machinery of war, the contactees offered their own kinder, gentler versions of technological power, based, as they saw it, on the space brothers' messages of peace and love. Giant Rock was thus the contactee equivalent of an air force base, complete with its own airstrip (dubbed the 'Interplanetary Airport') and outer space communications centre.

But van Tassel's most ambitious project was the 'Integratron', the contactee analogue of a nuclear power plant, which he began

building over a 'naturally occurring nexus' of electromagnetic energy. Van Tassel would not live to see the completion of the Integratron (he died in 1978), but this didn't really get in the way of it fulfilling its purpose as a containment facility for the power of high strangeness.

Ufology draws its purpose and meaning from the moment of contact with something that can't be explained, which Lacan called the real and which I think of as high strangeness. The downside to this is that if you get too close to the edge of high strangeness you stand the chance of losing your way back to normal reality. Van Tassel's Integratron sidestepped this problem by erecting a simple wooden structure around a stony piece of land and then declaring the empty space within to be invisible, holy, sacrosanct. It hardly mattered that the existence of the nexus could not be proven scientifically – for van Tassel and his family, building the Integratron was an act of faith that made the invisible truth of the contactee universe tangible.

Nonetheless, the Integratron was somewhat of an anomaly, for ultimately the contactees made the fatal mistake suffered by so many ufologists: they crossed the boundary separating normal reality from the glittering world of high strangeness.

Despite all their paranoia and conspiracy theories, nuts-and-bolts ufologists still drew a line between this world and the unknown one from which the UFOs emanated. UFOs are always someplace else in nuts-and-bolts ufology, whether that be outer space or deep within Area 51.

In contrast, because the contactees believed in a theosophical worldview which taught that *everything* was part of the same cosmic unity, traces of high strangeness were all around us. The

contactees believed they had all the answers to the flying saucer question, but it turned out that they had *too many* answers.

I said at the start of this chapter that the contactee universe came undone when the first space probes entered lunar orbit in the late '50s, but perhaps the rot had already set in before then. 1956 could also mark the end of the contactees, the year in which the University of Minnesota published its study of a contactee group's collective descent into madness, *When Prophecy Fails*. At turns both terrifying and absurd, *When Prophecy Fails* recounts sociologists Leon Festinger, Henry W. Riecken and Stanley Schachter's ill-fated investigation of a contactee group led by a Mrs Marian Keech, a housewife from suburban Wisconsin who had received telepathic messages from the space brothers in mid-1955 warning of a cataclysmic flood.

Keech's telepathic contact was Elder Brother Sananda, a.k.a. the reincarnation of Jesus Christ. The space brothers' message was strongly millenarian – Keech predicted that a great flood would soon engulf the Western Hemisphere and Europe, and only those who accepted Sananda's teachings would escape, via flying saucer. Terrified and yet elated that they were the chosen few, Keech and her supporters began to prepare for the evacuation.

The irony of the situation was that Keech's group was indeed being watched, and more closely than they suspected. Displaying a wondrously serene disregard for ethics that only social scientists and prison wardens can maintain without cracking a sadistic grin, the University of Minnesota researchers had planted a number of graduate students as *undercover moles* within Keech's inner circle. Today a university could confidently expect to be sued in the highest court in the land for approving such an experiment (although its ivory towers would be burnt to the ground by an angry mob of grad students long before the first day in court

dawned), but nonetheless this is where events took a turn for the unexpected.

The last laugh would be on the sociologists, for their tricksy experimental design didn't take into consideration that the 'impartial observers' installed in Keech's group would be given their own role to play in the contactees' private apocalypse. In my view, *When Prophecy Fails* should be added to all sociology courses as a cautionary fable of what happens When Experimental Design Fails.

Sananda had taught Keech a special word in his language – 'sice', which meant 'one whose true identity is unknown.' The sice could be literally anything or, more ominously, *anybody*. Keech was fond of identifying perfect strangers as the sice, such as local teenagers who, having got wind of the drama playing out in their neighbourhood, harassed Keech mercilessly, ringing her doorbell at all hours of the night and claiming to be spacemen. But in the end it was the strangers within, the clandestine and increasingly nervous University of Minnesota observers, who embodied the paradoxically meaningless significance of the sice.

Although Keech and her followers were apparently unaware that they were the subjects of a sociological experiment, the University of Minnesota observers' reluctance to fully involve themselves in the group's evolving fantasy – ironically, so as not to influence the outcome of the experiment – did not go unnoticed. Keech and her followers subsequently developed a secondary fantasy in which these underpaid and overexploited grad students actually *were* space brothers sent to watch over the group.

As Keech's predictions for the great flood began to fail, the group's desire for an answer from outer space reached feverish intensity. Trapped in the house until the contactees gave up their

vigil or the apocalypse arrived, whichever came first, the observers were repeatedly implored to a deliver a message, *any* message:

> Dr Armstrong [Keech's second-in-command] looked at me expectantly and the others in the group seemed to look at me expectantly and Dr. Armstrong said, 'I'd like to hear from you. Haven't you something to tell us?' And I said, 'Why no, I don't know of anything I have to tell you.' And he said, 'Well, can't you sing us a song?' and I said, 'Why no, if you knew what kind of a singing voice I have, you wouldn't want me to sing a song.'

For Keech and her followers, the secret observers' inability to reveal their true identities became what Lacan once called the 'answer from the real'. Although the real means nothing in itself, sometimes a normal object or event can become infused with the otherworldly aura of the real when it appears unexpectedly and yet seemingly *in response to our actions*.

We've all had this feeling before. It can be relatively benign, like when someone says, 'All we need now is for it to start raining!' and a shower appears out of nowhere. Or it can be rather more spooky, like the stories you hear about a friend of a friend running late to catch a flight only to be delayed at the last moment by a phone call that turns out to be a wrong number, a car that won't start, the cat stuck up a tree, whatever. When they finally arrive at the airport they've missed their flight – only to discover that the plane crashed on take-off, killing all on board . . . suddenly a simple, random event shouts out its presence: the universe is making itself known. The answer from the real is hard to ignore, even when we don't know what the question was.

Being contactees, Keech and her inner circle fully believed that the entire universe was imbued with cosmic meaning, perfectly understood by the space brothers but lost to us Earthlings.

The sice was a messenger from the cosmos, and its arrival was expected. But with each appearance of the sice, Keech received *another* answer from the universe, with the result that she was continually thrown onto a new, random course. Who were the real space brothers? Why wouldn't they reveal themselves? Beyond the failure of Keech's predictions to come true, the group's reliance on little fragments of high strangeness floating on the mundane surface of suburbia meant that they could never stop looking for more answers from the space brothers to sustain their belief.

Festinger and co. concluded that Keech and her disciples did not truly expect to be saved; instead, their antics were designed to elicit a response from the space brothers. What the sociologists missed in their account was the success of this strategy, for it ultimately allowed Keech to continue pursuing the cosmic truth for the rest of her life.

'Marian Keech' was the alias used by the University of Minnesota researchers. Her real name was Dorothy Martin (1900–1992), although in later years she went by the more mystical-sounding Sister Thedra. Martin's involvement with flying saucers and space brothers did not end with her failure to predict the Great Flood – if anything, her influence in contactee circles actually grew stronger in the years after the events described in *When Prophecy Fails*. In 1957 she spent a year in Peru with none other than George Hunt Williamson, where the pair established the Abbey of the Seven Rays, a theosophical/contactee retreat near Lake Titicaca. Martin returned to the United States in 1961 to live on the slopes of Mt Shasta in Northern California, rumoured to be a gateway to the Hollow Earth and the home of the *inner* space brothers. In her final years Martin founded the Association of Sananda to ensure that the teachings of the space brothers would be passed on to later generations.

Such were the contactees, ladies and gentlemen. No, I don't believe any of it either (although part of me, perhaps that wide-eyed young nerd who spent hours staring out the hospital window, wishes the contactees had been right, because now, rather than heading up to the hills for a weekend B & B retreat, we could be boarding a rocket bound for chakra realignment by the banks of a Martian canal instead). But you've got to admire their resilience in the face of everyone who told them to give it up – NASA, nuts-and-bolts ufologists, megalomaniac sociologists, local teenagers. As Dorothy Martin/Marian Keech/Sister Thedra's biography shows, a contactee's faith in the reality of UFOs could survive indefinitely in exchange for a fantasy that never assumed stable form, but was always shifting orbit from one world to the next.

I'd come to a decision. Right until the last moment I toyed with the idea of crossing into California to see what remained of the Integratron for myself, but even before I checked out of my hotel in Tonopah I knew that this lonely desert outpost would be the end of the road for me in the United States. I would look no further for UFOs in this country.

I couldn't bear another disappointment. In America I had become a rather lonely ufology-ologist, barred from visiting the official seats of power due to the rising terror alert and too used to walking on the graves of events that happened before I was born. Rather than visit the past again, I decided to radically alter my travel plans.

UFOs had been reported from the vast continent south of the Rio Grande as early as July 1947 when, just weeks after Kenneth Arnold's sighting, a Brazilian topographer narrowly escaped capture at the hands of spindly-looking aliens not far from São Paulo, Brazil's largest city. Argentina's air force ran

a series of Project Blue Book-like UFO investigations in the 1950s (which turned out to be as equally inconclusive as those conducted by their US counterparts), while UFO sightings became commonplace along a line of isolated points spanning the spine of the Andes through Chile, Bolivia and Peru. In Puerto Rico and Mexico the vampiric *chupacabra* or 'goatsucker,' thought by some to be the horrific offspring of secret human-alien genetic experiments, was reported in conjunction with the mysterious deaths by exsanguination of hundreds of livestock. It struck me that the levels of high strangeness were always that little higher in Latin America than in its neighbours to the north.

In the Hispanic world, UFOs are known as *Objetos Voladores no Identificados*, or *los OVNIs* – a direct translation of the English. I wanted to meet witnesses who saw an OVNI *yesterday*, not sixty years ago. Everything pointed for me to head south.

I contacted my airline with a sudden change in plans – rather than flying home directly from Los Angeles, I would take a flight to Buenos Aires instead. And after that . . . well, I didn't know exactly where I'd go next or when I'd be back, and that was the truth. Freed of the constraints of time and an itinerary, I suddenly found myself giving in to the enthusiasm and excitement of setting off into the unknown. Once again, high strangeness was my destination.

I returned to LA, where I had a few days to wait until my plane flew out. The security measures against possible terrorist attacks in the city were alarmingly high, as were the number of personnel in military uniform on the streets. Three enlisted men sat down next to me in the coffee lounge I was reading in one morning, preparing for my venture south. Some time later three of the men got up to pay their bill, leaving one of their number behind. *That doesn't add up*, I thought quietly to myself. Disconcerted, I stole a glance out of the corner of my eye and

recognised the Gallic countenance I was becoming unwelcomingly familiar with. As in the smoky confines of Rue Bebélons where I'd last seen the lich-like figure, the bright California sunlight shone through the blurred edges of the man and, when I looked closer, through his skin, too.

The flimsy cut-out of a man produced a pen and a scrap of paper from a breast pocket, writing something in a carefully messy hand. The thick glasses on the bridge of that insubstantial nose never swung in my direction as the figure rose to leave.

I leaned over the vacant seat to retrieve the note; I assumed it'd been left for me.

Si vous recherchez le mond réel, vous trouverez un Autre, I read.

NORTHERN CHILE &
THE VALLEY OF ELQUI
N
W
E
S
ATACAMA DESERT
AND PERÚ
SOUTH
PACIFIC
OCEAN
La Serena
Elqui River
Coquimbo
Vicuña
Monte Grande
Cochiguaz
THE ANDES
Observatorio
de Cerro Tololo
VALPARAISO
AND SANTIAGO
CHILE
ARGENTINA
(here be gauchos)

6

CHILE:
UFOLOGISTS IN THE MISTS

I touched down in the Argentine capital, Buenos Aires, just as that country's decade in the sun was coming to a crashing end. In the days that followed I often found myself searching skywards for the bomb I could hear plummeting to earth, but it was only the value of the peso dropping further still. Things became tense in the capital when the people, both the formerly rich and the forever poor, took to the streets in protest. I recall sitting down to one especially thick pampas-bred beefsteak in a street-side *parillada* when the largest crowd of people I'd ever seen appeared at the end of the Parisian-looking boulevard. Tens of thousands of people, the largest casting call for *Evita!* ever staged, came shouting and chanting and waving huge hand-painted banners that swept from one balconied side of the avenue to the other. Whole *barrios* from the outer city were on the move, the hastily painted slogans proclaiming their ideological allegiances: *El Barrio de San Blas CCC: Clases Corrientes y Comunistas!* The wind changed direction and the roar of the crowd got louder, angrier. Many of the marchers, I saw, were armed with the improvised weaponry of the mob: motorbike chains, lengths of pipe, dull and rusted machetes.

The city suddenly shifted in fear beneath my feet. Up and down the street, storeholders were busy pulling down shutters and disappearing into doorways. The moustachioed restaurateur that ran the parillada I was dining in rushed over, eyes wide with alarm. 'Better get going, *hermano*,' he advised tersely. With a final swig from my glass of red, I paid for my food faster than I had ever done before and fled down a side street. Behind me, police sirens shrieked over the cries of the mob as it surged down the boulevard. Back in my *pension*, I breathlessly told the first person I saw – a young backpacker named Ehud, fresh out of the Israeli Defence Force – what was happening outside. He nodded appreciatively. 'I have seen seven street battles in Gaza,' he told me. 'You and I will survive Buenos Aires.'

From Buenos Aires I crossed Argentina, meeting sometimes the right, sometimes the wrong kind of people until, some weeks later, the little bus I was riding in entered a mountain pass and we were in Chile. Argentina had not yielded the rich ufological ore I knew lay hidden in the South American continent, but I had higher hopes of its neighbour and sometime rival on the Pacific coast.

I went to Chile in search of a myth. Rarely seen by the outside world, Chile's shy and retiring mountain ufologists live in small family groups in the high valleys of the Andes. The town of Vicuña (named, for reasons unknown, after a species of camelid indigenous to the Andean cordillera that resembles a leaner, more athletic version of the llama) would be my staging point. Nestled in the Valle del Elqui, Vicuña lies some eight hours bus ride north of the urbane capital of Santiago in the Norte Chico or 'Little North,' a semi-arid region that travellers pass through before entering the moonscape of the Atacama Desert on the border with Peru, where it has *never* rained.

The Elqui Valley boasts some of the clearest skies in the continent, making it an ideal location for observing the heavens. A string of pearly white domes adorns the peaks surrounding the valley, among them the two-thousand-metre-high Observatorio de Cerro Tololo, one of the largest astronomical observatories in the Southern Hemisphere. (Sceptics note: the other main industry in the Elqui is the manufacture of *pisco*, a potent brandy made from the moscatel grapes that thrive in the valley's sunny climate. The observatories and the distilleries are located at a safe distance from each other – there's nothing more dangerous to science than a drunken astronomer with a fifty-inch reflector.)

Scientists, however, are not the only folks who gravitate to the dry quartzite ranges of the Elqui. For similar reasons – clear skies and something to do with the rocks, as I would discover – the valley is also famous for its UFO sightings. My research led me to believe that latter-day contactees had colonised the Elqui's upper reaches in an effort to get closer to the space brothers. In the snow-clad Andes those trendy ski-suits would make sense, at least.

My bus departed Santiago as the first rain for the year began to fall. No, wait – 'raining' would be a reckless understatement, and understatements are as useful to ufology-ologists as blurry photos are to scientists. Chile was engulfed in a once-in-a-decade-storm, the tantrum-throwing bastard child of El Niño whose front stretched a full five hundred kilometres from Santiago in the centre of the country to La Serena in the north. The coach I took to the Norte Chico had virtually floated out of the capital the previous day as stormwater drains and ditches overflowed en masse. This had all been terribly exciting at first until great, gaping holes split the surface of the road, sucking down the brown flood like so much dirty bathwater. The grim-faced coach driver took evasive action, crossing into incoming traffic to avoid the

collapsing road that would soon make all routes out of the city impassable.

Next morning in Vicuña the downpour had stopped, but in its wake a thick layer of cloud now stretched unbroken across the valley, breaking against the great walls of the mountains like an inverted sea. In a region famed for clear skies, this constituted a meteorological event of the highest anomaly, and townsfolk gathered in the plaza and on street corners to gaze up at the grey mass, shaking their heads in amazement. Whole squadrons of flying saucers could have performed an aerobatic version of Swan Lake above us and nobody in the valley would've been the wiser.

Present-day locals in Vicuña knew precious little about UFO sightings in the valley, but among the nonplussed looks and embarrassed smiles a lead emerged – a certain Don Orlando Ribera, former radio DJ and current owner of the town pharmacy, who had interviewed local UFO witnesses some years past.

I found the Don's pharmacy on the main plaza. The assistant behind the counter, who looked very smart in a white high-collared pharmacist's tunic, pointed back into the plaza from whence I'd just arrived. 'Don Orlando has gone out for a moment,' the man explained.

'That's fine,' I replied. 'When will he be back?'

The assistant shook his head impatiently. 'No, no, no, Don Orlando has just gone *outside*.' And he mimed walking out of the store.

'Yes, I understand – can't I wait for him here?' I persisted, feeling increasingly bewildered.

'He's gone! *Out there!*' Almost moved to tears, the assistant flipped open the counter and, taking me firmly by the arm, marched us both out into the plaza to a park bench occupied by a snappily dressed older man smoking a large cigar. 'There! This

is Don Orlando!' cried the assistant, pointing at the startled man with the cigar, and nearly collapsed.

Don Orlando and I exchanged uncomprehending looks. 'Why didn't you just tell me he was sitting on the bench?' I asked the assistant with real confusion.

The nervous wreck of a man looked up at me. 'I thought you didn't speak Spanish,' he said.

I slapped a hand to my forehead. 'What am I'm doing right now?' I had to ask.

Don Orlando turned out to be a large man in his sixties with fleshy lips and grey hair swept dramatically back from his forehead. A red kerchief lay knotted expertly about his neck. The Don was quite the man about town, an image undermined only by the size and prominence of his great, white teeth, which he bared like a rakishly handsome country horse every time he spoke. 'You're looking for *los OVNIS, no*?' he reflected, flashing that smile. He listened to my questions as he stubbed out and carefully stowed away his cigar in a cylindrical case made of tin and embossed with figures of prancing horses. After a moment's consideration Don Orlando suggested I visit a small town further up the valley, deep in *el interior*, as Chileans say when they speak of the mountains. 'Go to Cochiguaz,' he said. 'You will find what you're looking for there. But . . .' he trailed off, shrugging his shoulders uncomfortably.

'But what?' I asked. 'Is it very far away?'

Don Orlando shook his great equine head. 'No, no, no, Cochiguaz is one, maybe two hours from here. To get there is not a problem. But the people . . . *bueno*,' and he lowered his radio announcer's voice as if making a comment off the air. 'The people in Cochiguaz can be *strange*,' he explained, and gave me a knowing wink. I bought an umbrella and left the Don's pharmacy with this piece of confidence-boosting advice.

Back in my *pensión*, I spread my maps of the Elqui region across the bed. Cochiguaz, I saw, was about fifty kilometres further up the valley, almost on the border with Argentina – practically as far as you could go into the 'interior' of a country never more than two hundred kilometres wide. Cross-checking with the local bus timetables (I'm a fastidiously organised traveller despite dwelling in dismal chaos at home), I discovered that Cochiguaz lay some twenty kilometres beyond the furthest reach of public transport. No matter – one thing I'd learnt in South America was that in a continent where rates of private car ownership were low, travellers could always find a ride willing to take extra passengers. For a price, naturally.

I was one of only three passengers on the minibus that departed from outside Don Orlando's pharmacy early next morning. Clouds and mist still obscured the higher reaches of the valley, while the river below had risen dramatically overnight. 'We may not make it to Montegrande,' one of the other passengers, a weather-beaten man in a woollen jumper and beanie, remarked dully. 'The roads may be blocked.' If the driver heard him, he didn't answer.

The road climbed swiftly. This close to the walls of the valley I could see the deep crystalline structure of the mountains, prisms cast in white and blue amid the scree and pebbles. The Andes are at their most exposed in the Elqui; these are the very vertebrae of the continent, plunging out of sight beneath the valley floor into flaming zones of subsidence I could only imagine. Unless, that is, the stories of a deeply buried interior realm peopled by a race of space-faring beings were true . . .

The valley twisted higher into the mountains through an ever more complex succession of synclines, anticlines, patsyclines and other more painful-looking geological contortions. With the mists finally beginning to disperse, the tremendous peaks of

the Andean cordillera became visible, towering over the narrowing valley floor and its patchwork of vineyards and small farms. My two sullen (or just plain scared) companions got off at isolated points on the road, crying '*Bajame!*' for the driver to halt the bus, which accelerated away in a cloud of dust and gravel before their feet barely touched the ground.

An hour after leaving Vicuña, the bus reached the end of its route in the deserted village of Montegrande. The Cochiguaz road – a dirt track clinging to the side of a gorge – disappeared up its own tiny tributary valley. I'd penetrated deep into the interior, but was without a visible means of transport for the final, crucial leg of my journey.

My first act as the new Australian Ambassador to the Chilean Interior: I bought myself some *empanadas*. South America runs on these doughy little pockets of goodness. With that wonderful flair for declension common to the Latin languages, *empanada* means something like 'the breaded one,' but they remind me more of Cornish pasties than anything else. In Argentina empanadas are small and often deep-fried; fillings include *carne* (beef), *queso* (cheese) or *humitas* (corn), and folks buy them by the half-dozen. Further north in Bolivia and Peru they change name to become *salteñas*; the crease where the sheet of dough is joined together is now along the top rather than the side, and chopped vegetables augment the pork or chicken (or other less palatable meats – I suspect disappeared political prisoners, or parts thereof). But it's in Chile that the empanada reaches its complete and fullest potential of being-in-the-world. In Chile an empanada might be as delicate as the lightest samosa, or as large and voluminous as a small portmanteau; they can be filled with freshly caught seafood, succulent steak or whole boiled eggs. Chileans consume mountains of empanadas morning, noon and night – in Bellavista, Santiago's raucous nightlife quarter, empanada stalls stay open

24/7, proving that kebabs aren't the only fast food to excite certain chemical receptors in the inebriated human brain.

Empanaderías, as the stalls that sell empanadas are called, are always situated in the busiest parts of town – the *plaza de armas*, the train and bus stations, the marketplaces – which makes the empanada vendor an ideal source of local information.

'There you go, *gringuito*,' the woman in the empanada stand said to me, handing my purchase over the counter (*gringo* and its diminutive *gringuito* or 'little gringo' is not necessarily a derogatory term in Latin America, especially the further you are from Mexico). She looked at me thoughtfully. 'Where do you want to go?' she asked, guessing my purpose in the empty town.

'Cochiguaz,' I replied between mouthfuls. She nodded sagely.

'Wait here, *gringuito*. When Hernán returns he'll take you to Cochiguaz.'

'Great,' I said, feeling relieved. 'Who's Hernán?'

The woman shook her head as if to say she didn't have time for complicated explanations. (And such a busy morning for business, I thought to myself ungraciously.)

'Don't you worry,' was all she said. 'Just wait here and Hernán will come by. Should be soon now.' She smiled to indicate her duty as public information provider had finished.

I made myself comfortable on a park bench in the plaza and started on my second empanada. Delicious juices filled my mouth as I bit into the pastry. *Me and My Empanada* – if ever I wrote a travel book about Chile, I already had the title. I prepared myself for what might be a long wait.

But no traveller would wait long for El Hernán. Whether through bush telegraph, mental telepathy or a simple mobile phone call, word had gotten to Hernán that a ride was waiting for him in town. In a squeal of bald tyres and protesting suspension coils, a decrepit white Ford pickup roared into the plaza, sliding to a

halt a scant few feet from where I sat. The cabin was missing its windscreen, none of the hubcaps matched, the left indicator was permanently flashing. A wide-eyed, spiked-haired man in his fifties leapt out of the vehicle in a cloud of dust.

'Cochiguaz? Who wants to go to Cochiguaz?' he shouted, searching around for passengers. 'You!' he pointed at me, the only other person in the plaza. 'You want to go to Cochiguaz, *gringuito*?'

This was the famous Hernán, mountain guide to only the most desperate and foolish of travellers. He had perhaps three teeth left in his upper jaw and shouted all his exchanges with me in an obscure dialect of Spanish I suspected was largely of his own making. Hernán had lived his entire life between the valley walls; driving people to and from Cochiguaz seemed to be both his job and his passion. The great storm of the previous days had damaged the mountain roads in the upper Elqui, Hernán explained, and so he felt reluctantly compelled to include danger money in his fee. Indeed, asking the exorbitant sum he indicated by holding up a number of gnarled fingers might be a dangerous proposition with the wrong sort of passenger. Hernán smiled winsomely. I got his price down to an acceptable level before getting in the cabin.

'I like you, *gringuito*!' he shouted in my ear as we left the village in a cloud of dust and pebbles.

I was getting used to the bracing ambience of the open-air cabin when a second group of travellers appeared on the side of the road – a moustachioed man in his early thirties with his wife and two young children. 'My son!' Hernán shouted with pride. 'What's his name?' I asked. 'Hernán!' Hernán shouted. After the requisite handshakes and double cheek kisses, Hernán's son took over the wheel, his family squeezing onto the bench seat beside him. Hernán Sr and I moved to the tray of the pickup, where we buttoned up our jackets against the cold. My eyes and nose

watered uncontrollably in the frigid slipstream while Hernán shouted out helpful descriptions of the valley like, 'River! River!' and 'Snow! *Snow!*'

The valley of the Cochiguaz River snaked around a hairpin bend to enter a gorge barely a hundred metres wide. The massive walls of the mountains closed in about us, their precipitous slopes clothed in an uneasy mix of giant cacti and xerophytic dwarf acacias, arthritic branches laden down by a swollen multitude of fleshy black seedpods. Higher up I saw a darker band of rock slashing across the paler crystalline quartzite that dominated the geology of the region. The darker seam of rock was a natural aquifer, I guessed, for great jets of water gushed out of cracks along its length like water from a rooftop during a rainstorm, adding its spray to the churning mist in the gorge. 'That's beautiful,' I exclaimed, and Hernán beamed a giant gap-toothed grin in agreement.

An hour later we were in the upper reaches of the Cochiguaz Valley. The great wall of the Andes loomed closer still; Argentina was just the other side of the range. Hernán's son and family had already disembarked, leaving Hernán and myself to complete the journey up the ravaged Cochiguaz road. Finally we entered the tiny community of Cochiguaz itself. I looked around in trepidation at the scattered shacks and dwellings that straggled up the steep valley. As in Montegrande, there was not a person in sight.

Hernán leaned across the cabin to open my door. 'Cochiguaz!' he confirmed. 'I'll be back to pick you up tomorrow!' I reluctantly climbed out of the pickup, pitifully small daypack in hand. Hernán pulled the door shut behind me.

'Who should I talk to?' I called over the truck's protesting engine. It sounded like an emphysemic donkey in the throes of the Heimlich manoeuvre, and Hernán cursed it roundly before answering my question.

'Sister Gladys!' he yelled. 'She lives up there!' and he pointed to a rambling building up the valley, partially hidden behind a screen of spindly eucalypts. '*Nos vemos, amígo*!' my gallant driver cried, and was gone in a snarling crash of worn gears, in search of more adventures. Just as long as they took place within the valley.

I struck out over rocky ground towards the house Hernán had pointed out. Sister Gladys – should I expect a shaven-headed nun, or a dreadlocked guru?

The poorly defined track passed between two gateposts to enter a substantial property. A small creek, swollen into a raging torrent, ran down the centre of the compound to join the Cochiguaz River a few hundred metres further down the slope. I could make out the distinct sound of hammering coming from the low building ahead.

A pair of pointed ears suddenly crested over a rise in the path, followed by the tawny body of a large, well-fed Alsatian dog. The dog's eyes locked with mine in momentary surprise, and then it was loping towards me, lips pulled back in a snarl.

I stopped dead in my tracks, fear dilating every blood vessel in my body. As the Alsatian closed for the kill I cast my eyes to the earth, avoiding eye contact with the beast, and thrust my hands into my jeans pockets. The dog halted a handful of paces in front of me, barking furiously but refusing to come any closer.

The standoff lasted a few tense moments. If I moved, the dog might attack. And the Alsatian couldn't allow itself to cede an inch of its territory. But then I heard a deep male voice calling from the house. '*Arturo!*' the unseen man called. '*Arturo! Ven aca!*' Arturo the Alsatian's ears pricked up at his master's voice and, without a second glance at me, he turned and bounded up the path.

As the dog left I noticed for the first time the pairs of feline eyes watching intently from among the undergrowth.

A large, hairy man in a thick woollen jumper came into sight. I'd guess he was the same age then as I am now, somewhere in his thirties. Although the hair on his head was starting to recede, his enormously thick beard was a lustrous black on black, and probably kept him nice and warm during the Andean winters. The man halted a few metres in front of me, calming Arturo with a gentle pat between the animal's pointed ears.

'*Buenos días, señor*,' I ventured. He fixed me with a quizzical, if not unfriendly, stare.

'*Buenos días, joven*,' he called in return. 'My name is Jorge. What is yours?'

Chileans, I should say, are not like other South Americans. Argentineans will argue passionately over the existential angst of the coffee bean before giving you their gold-embossed business card, while all that Brazilians need to kick off a street party are two total strangers and a car-boot of beer. Other South Americans characterise Chileans as *reservados*; Chileans often characterise themselves as melancholic. But don't let this fool you, for Chileans are also famed across the continent for their hospitality.

I introduced myself, and announced I was seeking Sister Gladys. Jorge shook his shaggy head. Sister Gladys was not in the valley, he said. She was stranded in Santiago, because of the storms. 'Why do you want to speak with her?' he asked.

I explained what I was doing in the Elqui. As I spoke Jorge was joined by a woman of about the same age accompanied by a young girl with long black hair.

'I want to talk about UFOs,' I finished lamely, frustrated that I couldn't express myself better in Spanish. Jorge and his wife, who introduced herself as Catarina, exchanged glances. They seemed puzzled by my presence in their valley. 'Too many clouds for UFOs today,' Jorge began. I nodded in resignation, expecting to be asked to leave.

But at that point the two cats that had watched my confrontation with Arturo chose to break their cover among the underbrush and burst onto the path, mewling loudly. 'What's all this then?' I asked the two tabbies distractedly, slipping unthinkingly into English.

My words had an unexpected effect. Ears pricking up in interest, they converged about my legs, rubbing themselves against my muddy jeans enthusiastically. Even over the flooding creek's gurgle I could hear their purring, a deep and contented tympani of pleasure.

The young girl giggled. 'Look!' she exclaimed, turning to her parents. 'The *gatos* like the *gringuito*!' Her parents broke into broad smiles . . . and the moment changed, just like that. Sometimes when I tell this story people suggest that this contactee family somehow read their pets' actions as tacit approval for my presence, as if the cats sensed the harmlessness of my intentions and communicated it to their owners. I don't really believe that. But did the contactees?

'Come, come inside,' Jorge now said with a more welcoming smile, 'and we can talk about OVNIs.' He and Catarina began walking back up the path to the house, Jorge pausing to call over his shoulder again, 'Come, come.'

The dark haired girl lingered a moment more. 'My name is Patricia,' she said earnestly. 'What is yours?'

'Martin,' I replied. Her young face broke into a shining smile.

'San Martín de los Andes!' she exclaimed in delight, naming the Argentinean general who famously crossed the Andes in 1818 to liberate Chile from the Spanish. I laughed at the vainglorious comparison.

'But where's my army?' I asked, looking searchingly around me. Patricia clapped her hands in delight, before turning without

another word and skipping up the path after her parents. Smiling, I followed.

The storm that had ripped through the Cochiguaz Valley had damaged many houses in the small settlement, and as we approached Jorge's house I saw it was missing half its roof. This explained the hammering noises I'd heard in the thin mountain air: Jorge and his family were repairing the torn and twisted tin sheets that had been the roof of their house.

I was handed a hammer. 'Like this,' Jorge demonstrated, and struck a nail home. Oh, hell, I thought. Workshop was never my best subject at school. Catarina smiled in encouragement. '*Así, así*,' she said soothingly.

My first blow missed the nail completely. My second bent it. Jorge paused to offer a torrent of DIY advice, but the Chilean accent is notoriously difficult to understand, even for other native speakers of Spanish. '*Así, así*,' I muttered, and raised my arm for the next blow.

The farce continued in this merry way for a few minutes more until, I'm sure, Jorge realised the repairs to his family home would progress faster without my help. Smiling apologetically, he fired off something rapid in his guttural Spanish, the crowded consonants disappearing almost as soon as he said them. Catarina nodded in agreement.

'*Joven*,' she said, addressing me clearly and slowly, 'we don't just look for UFOs. In Cochiguaz, we pray too. Would you like to pray with me?' Under the circumstances I felt I couldn't say no.

Catarina and I retired to the house and the family's 'chapel,' a tiny room bare except for a wooden table and two rickety stools. A bracing wind swept through the room from the gaping hole in the roof overhead. Catarina motioned for me to take a seat.

My hostess prepared a great stone censer carved from black volcanic rock that squatted evilly on the table, filling it with a

pungent mixture of cow-dung and ghee. She lit the offering with a smouldering taper, filling the small space of the chapel with an oily, acrid smoke that thankfully rose straight through the hole in the roof. Seating herself on the other stool, she turned to me with a peaceful expression. 'Relax and concentrate, *joven*,' Catarina instructed me, and began chanting what I surmised was an ancient Sanskrit prayer.

The analytical, critical part of my brain (is that the left or the right side? I can never remember – I'll call it the starboard side of my brain) that had spent so many hours absorbing the concentrated scholarly feng shui beneath the great dome of the State Library back in Melbourne noted that I was witnessing a classic example of contactee syncretism at work. Here, in a high valley of the Chilean Andes that the indigenous Diaguita people once held sacred, a modern *mestíza* woman recited a prayer in an ancient language from the other side of the world while giving up burnt offerings to the unseen extraterrestrial presences that hovered above the valley, just beyond radar range. The contactee repertoire of the spiritual and the mystical was still evolving, more than fifty years after the first contactees tried to make sense of UFOs through the teachings of theosophy.

The other part of my brain, the part in communication with my physical extremities, noted the mounting cold in the roofless room. After the first hour of immobility, of listening desperately to Catarina's chant for a sign that it was finishing, I began to lose contact with those extremities. To this day I cannot remember her mantra, I was so distracted by the numbness crawling through my body. At one point Arturo the Alsatian padded casually into the room, now fully at ease with my presence. He looked at me with those big, brown intelligent eyes, pink tongue lolling. *Come here and keep me warm*, I projected into his doggie brain with all the psychic energy I could muster, but the smug canine sauntered

off, tail wagging contentedly. Catarina missed the exchange, her eyes screwed shut in tantric concentration.

'*Om*,' Catarina intoned, and then . . . silence. She paused a frozen heartbeat or two before opening her eyes. As I made to unbend my protesting legs, Catarina turned to me, a note of exaltation entering her voice.

'Did you feel the power of the Cosmic Spirit, *joven*?' Unable to lie to this friendly contactee, I gave a feebly enthused grin.

'Not really,' I confessed, broken in body and spirit in a way that allowed no other answer.

Catarina was undaunted. 'Each finds the Spirit in their own manner,' she assured me.

Two friends from further down the valley had arrived to help fix the roof while Catarina and I were at prayer. The men, Adolfo and Eric, wore the dark woollen beanies that I'll always associate with Chile. They shook my hand warmly.

'I can't believe you're from Australia,' Adolfo said wonderingly. *I can't believe I've found the fabled mountain ufologists of Cochiguaz*, I wanted to say, but feared it would be disrespectful. A small, unexpected realisation dawned upon me: I, a scruffy Australian ufology-ologist with an outlandish Spanish accent and a distinct lack of homebuilding skills, was just as exotic to this troop of mountain ufologists as they were to me.

It was time for lunch, which had been simmering in an enormous cast iron pot under the watchful eye of Jorge and Catarina's daughter, Patricia. It turned out to be a gloriously thick lentil soup, and there was enough in the pot to feed a whole squadron of saucers, should they land in Cochiguaz. 'We are all vegetarians here,' Catarina told me proudly. I sensed a connection to the high karmic principles of Hinduism. 'Did you become vegetarian to honour the cosmic life force that flows through all living things?' I managed to phrase. Catarina looked at me

in surprise, before answering, 'No, it's just healthier, *te acuerdo*?' I nodded in agreement, and held out my bowl to Catarina's brimming ladle.

The lentil soup was really very good, and all the men at the table said so, including myself. Catarina beamed with pleasure. In the satisfied lull between first and second servings, I tentatively began to ask questions about UFO sightings in the valley.

I needn't have been so timid. 'We see UFOs in Cochiguaz all the time,' Jorge declared with great conviction.

'When was the last time you saw a UFO?' I asked.

'Three days ago,' Eric replied matter-of-factly. 'Before the storm,' he added.

'Wow,' I said. 'What did it look like?'

A great, glowing light in the night sky was what I could make out from his impenetrable Chilean accent. The others joined in, Eric launching into an extended story that I had great trouble following, but which seemed to suggest that UFOs were somehow crystalline in structure, like the rocks in the valley itself. Like attracts like, Eric appeared to be saying.

'*Como en cielo, así al bajo*,' Adolfo agreed. 'As in the heavens, so beneath it,' a paraphrase of the famous alchemical dictum of *as above, so below* if ever I heard one.

Jorge now took over the conversation. 'Not a year ago,' he told us, 'a Peruvian named Miguel Angel, a great holy man, came to Cochiguaz and met an alien brother on the rocks above this house.'

'Really?' I interjected. 'You mean a UFO landed here?'

Jorge and the others weren't too clear on this point. It seemed that Miguel Angel, in true contactee fashion, just 'knew' where to meet the space brother. 'And the alien visitor left a mark of his passage,' Jorge concluded. The others obviously knew this story

well and nodded in devout agreement. Jorge took me outside to explain further.

We stood on the steeply rising ground behind the house. From here the valley climbed precipitously to a narrow saddle between two guardian peaks whose tremendous dimensions rose clear through the vestigial clouds of the great rainstorm.

'Up there,' Jorge explained, pointing to a rocky outcrop partway up the slope, 'that's where Miguel Angel met the alien brother. And where the visitor stood, his shoes left a footprint in the rock.' *Just like Adamski in the desert*, I thought to myself. And the soles of his shoes were embossed in the forgotten language of humanity, even as the souls of the witnesses were etched in fear . . .

'Can we go up there?' I asked.

Jorge shook his head. 'Too dangerous today,' he said. 'The rocks are slippery.' Jorge's tale continued, however.

'The UFO landed up there,' he explained, indicating a point above the alleged footprint site. 'When the shining craft took off, a spring appeared among the dry stones. My friend,' Jorge said, gripping my shoulder in his excitement, 'the water from the spring is very, very pure. The purest in the valley. We drink from the spring every day – you drank it today, *joven*, when I offered you food and water in my house.' I swallowed involuntarily at the thought. Jorge grinned through his great beard.

Up to now I had been on the alert for theosophical influences in contactee stories, but this part of Jorge's tale was a clear borrowing from Catholic mystical narrative, itself adopted by the early Church from a multitude of pagan beliefs – saints are always leaving springs in their wake, which strikes me as somewhat ironic seeing that Jesus proved his divinity by walking *on* water. Whatever. But on a dry hillside in the northern suburbs of Mexico City stands the Basilica de Guadalupe, the holiest Catholic shrine in all the Americas. Here, in 1537, the Blessed

Virgin of Guadalupe appeared to Juan Diego, a humble Aztec convert who was later persecuted by the Spanish authorities for spreading word of his close encounter with the Holy Mother. The Virgin retaliated against her sceptics with a series of miracles that included imprinting her likeness on Juan Diego's cloak and sprouting roses from his walking staff. In a final, climactic moment a clear spring gushed forth from where her feet touched the ground, and today thousands upon thousands of pilgrims journey every week to the shrine to gaze on the holy stream and pray for the Virgin's intercession. (Mexico City water being what it is, the Virgin's spring isn't as potable as the one in Cochiguaz, although that doesn't stop brave pilgrims from sampling it.) Which makes me wonder whether it's only a matter of time before there's a contactee basilica up there on the highest reaches of the Cochiguaz Valley, charging twenty pesos a glass of authentic space brother spring water.

Adolfo now joined us at the back of the house. He nodded companionably to Jorge, who had yet more story to tell.

Higher still in the valley there were rock carvings of great power left by the now vanished Diaguita people. 'The carvings point to an underground city,' Adolfo told me. The two men pointed out the mountain on the left flank of the saddle, dark rocks showing through snow. Two red boulders marked the entrance to the city, Jorge and Adolfo agreed. Flying saucers could come and go from this portal whenever they liked, but ordinary people could only see it on very special days.

'Come, *amigos*,' Adolfo now said, 'there's still more soup inside.' Jorge's great ursine beard split into another grin, wider still at the thought of his wife's cooking. We filed back into the roofless house, the two Chilean men chatting amiably, leaving me to gaze a moment longer at the distant peak and its portal stones

to another place. Three of Patricia's great, sleek cats watched our passage with feline disinterest.

Hernán picked me up the following morning, as promised. I bid a warm farewell to Jorge and Catarina and their troop of mountain ufologists before we made the return journey, Hernán negotiating the downhill curves with equal measures of confidence and Madonna-beseeching fear. Finally, back in my *pensión* in Vicuña I sat down to take notes of what I'd seen in Cochiguaz. I was already beginning to identify in my mind what set apart a distinct, grassroots Latin American take on UFOs from mainstream, Western ufologists. It was something to do with the rocks, but exactly what I wasn't sure just yet.

The following day I caught a bus out of the valley and headed north into the Atacama Desert. I didn't see any UFOs in the Elqui, but I couldn't be disappointed. It *was* very cloudy.

7

BOLIVIA:
BEACON IN THE JUNGLE

From the Elqui Valley I travelled north through the barren emptiness of Chile's Norte Grande with the intention of crossing the border into Peru and making for the Nazca Lines, arguably the premier ufological landmark in the continent.

I would make it to Nazca eventually, but along the way I became distracted from my original purpose. I can pinpoint the moment: a sweat-filled morning feeling trapped in the concrete bunker that served as Antofogasta's bus terminal, a traffic-choked port city on the southern edge of the Atacama Desert, the driest in the world. From here I could board the northbound coach with its cargo of guesting Peruvian miners returning home from the Chuquicamata copper mine as planned; or I could take one of the smaller minibuses known as *colectivos* leaving for the landlocked nation of Bolivia.

It hardly made sense to make this detour, which had sprung fully formed into my mind like the treasure hungry ghost of a long-dead *conquistador*, but that was the entire truth of my research at that moment – nothing was making a lot of sense. No matter how cunningly I deployed my theoretical traps, the same question lay in wait on the last page of every book I read, moving silently

behind the words like a puma through undergrowth: how do you talk about something that's identified as being unidentified? Is that it – can we conclude nothing else? And if so, why then do people *keep on talking* about UFOs?

Actually, that was three questions. I've never believed in the ufologists' single and unitary version of the Truth, but on the other hand I was tired of simply uncovering more questions, and I believe now that's why I struck out into Bolivia. The itinerary I had so confidently plotted back in Tonopah had become my very own great, mouldering albatross, the white feathers trailing behind me from where I'd stuffed this corpse of grand intentions into my dusty backpack.

Through the following weeks I pushed up and over Bolivia's windswept central highlands before sliding down the other side into the vast greenness of the Amazon basin. I fell in with a multinational collective of fellow travellers, British, Dutch and Queenslanders, each more reckless than the last (if you count me as the first).

In Trinidad, a steaming river-port town and last outpost before the Brazilian frontier, we took passage down the broad and unhurried Rio Mamoré on an overladen riverboat named the *Avraham-Moisés*. A mere tributary of the distant Amazon, the Mamoré was still the biggest river I'd ever seen.

Despite the steady encroachment of Bolivian settlers into the rainforest and palm savannas of the surrounding hinterland, the densely forested banks of the river seemed almost completely untouched by human influence. The river's coffee-coloured waters supported large, highly visible populations of scaly caimans and pink hued river dolphins, these being odd, bulbous headed creatures, virtually blind from the adaptation of countless generations living in the thick silt of the river. The smaller tributaries were reputed to be the hunting grounds of the fearsome piranha,

although the riverboat crew assured me the greater danger lay in treading on a freshwater stingray as it lay concealed on the bottom of one of the many shallow creeks criss-crossing the jungle like veins in a leaf, its near-perfect camouflage concealing a venomous spine of awful lethality.

We were soon rechristened with travellers' names by the bemused crew of the riverboat. Bolivar, an affable fellow who financed his travels by working in a Brisbane liquor store, was so named for the fancied resemblance his sideburns shared with those of Simón Bolívar, the greatest hero of South America's wars of independence. Bolivar's best mate was Flaco (meaning 'Slim' in Spanish, a common enough nickname in that language), a laconic Queenslander who spoke excellent traveller's Spanish with the broadest Australian accent heard outside of an Outback pub.

Then there was El Profesor Joven, or the Young Professor, so dubbed by the crewmembers for his quiet and reflective nature, this despite the fact he hailed from Essex. Tall and long-limbed like so many of his compatriots, El Capitan Holandés – the Dutch Captain – had been the last to join the collective at the river dock in Trinidad. '*Como un leon!*' the crew would say in admiration, watching the Dutch Captain leap off the gunwales into the river for our daily *baño*, the sole concession the riverboat master made to the hygiene of his paying passengers. For fifteen minutes each morning the *Avraham-Moisés* slowed to a leisurely jog; a long rope was thrown behind one of the barges lashed to the riverboat's sides, and anyone willing to attract the attention of the inquisitive caimans (or rather more dangerously, the disembowelling antlers of a submerged snag) would be dragged through the Mamoré's brown waters until they were clean.

As for myself, I was just Martín, with the emphasis on the second syllable in the Spanish fashion. Thanks to my proficiency in Spanish, I became the object of persistent attention from the

crew. '*Martín! Estás dormiendo?*' they would call to me as I tried to take an afternoon nap in my gently swaying hammock.

In the weeks that followed our quitting the riverboat in Guayaramerím, our collective's travels across the map of Bolivia resembled the stumbling tracks of a giant aquatic Brazilian centipede trying to find its nest after one too many caipirinhas down at the cantina. In Riberalta we featured briefly but spectacularly in a local politician's election campaign when we were summarily hustled off the street, dressed in the colours of the party and paraded on the back of a truck laden with stacks of amplifiers. In Rurrenabaque we built a makeshift raft from salvaged logs and set off downriver, but had to be rescued some hours later by a passing canoe after our so-called jungle guide steered us into a tangle of half-submerged trees midstream. In Potosí, back in the southern highlands, we witnessed the ritual sacrifice of llamas to the Earth Goddess Pachamama at the entrance to the infernal Cerro Rico silver mines; the carcasses were gutted, skinned and barbequed, each celebrant receiving a hunk of blackened camelid meat. It was the toughest – and holiest – steak I've ever had.

The society of travellers is one held together by stories, I soon discovered. There's often precious little else to unite them in such a fluid social environment – many travellers become practised in creating portable, lightweight synopses of their lives. And yet I held back from telling the members of my collective the real, ufological reason for my travels in South America.

But I couldn't shield my companions from the glow of high strangeness for too long. Finally, one night as we sat debating the authenticity of the Nazca Lines over a few quiet beers in a charmless bar in Santa Cruz – a teeming boomtown in the Bolivian lowlands – I accidentally let my guard down.

'You're doing your PhD in *what?*' asked a thunderstruck Bolivar.

Feeling suddenly exposed, I explained what I did with my time back in Australia. 'So, I guess that means you can call me a ufology-ologist,' I concluded meekly. I felt very aware of four sets of eyes staring at me in surprise.

Flaco, the wiry Queenslander, was the first to recover.

'Strewth!' he said. 'Why the bloody hell didn't you tell us earlier, Plowman?'

I shrugged, as I wasn't quite sure myself. What Flaco said next, however, surprised me.

'I mean, what's the bloody point of us all sitting here talking about it when we can just go to Nazca and decide for ourselves?'

I laughed, but Flaco's angular face was uncharacteristically serious. 'No, listen for a moment, would'ya mate,' he said. 'None of *us* came to South America for any specific reason – and hating your job back home doesn't count,' he added for Bolivar's benefit, who suppressed a laugh. 'We're travellers, the rest of us jokers. But *you*, Plowman, I reckon you are on a journey. I dunno about you other blokes, but checking out some temple built by aliens can't be any worse than seeing another bloody church where another bloody national hero is buried.'

The others murmured in agreement.

I considered Flaco's proposition for a moment. *Why not?* I thought to myself. Why do this all by myself? And besides, if I did happen to stumble across something, you know, *highly strange*, some witnesses to back me up would certainly come in handy. Just in case, you know.

Reaching a decision, I turned to the others. 'Right,' I said, 'I'll do it. I'll take you to a UFO hot spot.'

Bolivar raised his beer. 'To UFOs – and bloody long bus rides!' he cried. Four more glasses were raised in a hearty cheer.

Rummaging in my daypack, I drew out my increasingly battered South America travel guide. 'The thing is,' I said, 'Nazca

itself is way too far away – it'd take a week just to get there.' I scrutinised the map, which unhelpfully didn't come with major UFO sites marked. 'Alright,' I finally decided, pointing to a place on the map almost in the centre of Bolivia. 'There's another site not far from here, just outside the town of Samaipata.'

'Samaipata?' echoed the Young Professor. 'What's at Samaipata?'

'The ruins of a pre-Inca temple,' I replied. 'Ufologists believe it's an ancient astronaut landing site.'

'Exshellent,' said the Dutch Captain, in his near perfect English. 'And what are anshient ashtronauts?'

'Ah, that's the *Chariots of the Gods* stuff,' put in Flaco before I could answer. 'Those jokers reckon aliens built the pyramids, isn't that right?'

I nodded. 'Yeah. In fact that's where I first read about Samaipata, in *Chariots of the Gods*. Maybe I should tell you what I know about ancient astronauts.' If only I had my notes with me, I cursed inwardly.

'Hold on a minute,' interrupted Bolivar, rising to his feet. 'I'd better get us another round before you get started on this,' and so saying he made straight for the bar.

Surprisingly perhaps, the idea that extraterrestrial beings visited the Earth in the distant past has not always been confined to fringe science. Even the normally inquisitorial arch-sceptic Carl Sagan asked whether prehistoric human cultures might have experienced extraterrestrial intervention in his 1966 book *Intelligent Life in the Universe*, cowritten with the celebrated Soviet astrophysicist I.S. Shklovskii.

But ancient astronaut theories didn't really become popular in their own right until the publication of Erich von Däniken's *Erinnerungen an die Zukunft* in 1968, better known in English as *Chariots of the Gods? Unsolved Mysteries of the Past*. In a flash, ufology

was turned on its head by a stocky, blond Swiss hotelier with a penchant for safari jackets who was about to go to prison for fraud and tax evasion (a conviction, it must be said, that was overturned in 1982, a fact rarely noted by von Däniken's many detractors). No ufologist since George Adamski has attracted such rabid and censorious denunciation – whole volumes have been written about the maddeningly jovial Swiss author, attacking the tottering edifice of von Däniken's theories like a cadre of incensed demolition experts laying charges at the base of the Matterhorn.

Von Däniken's theory will come as no surprise to anyone familiar with *Star Trek* or the fourth Indiana Jones movie, the former possibly influencing the Swiss writer (if only we can imagine Mr Spock dubbed into German), while the latter should almost certainly credit its storyboard to *Chariots of the Gods*. Millennia ago, after humans learnt to live in simple social collectives but well before the concepts of god, king and country arrived to cloud the amiable processings of our simian minds, space-faring aliens made contact with our primitive ancestors. Overawed by the extraterrestrials' control of the natural world – *They fly through the air in great birds of flames! They kill from a distance!* – these early societies mistakenly worshipped the aliens as gods.

After the 'gods' departed for the heavens, the account of their 'divine' visitation spread to become the basis for the world's myths and religions. Great temples were erected to commemorate the visitors; statues were carved in their likenesses; lines were drawn in the sand to entice them back. But as the years passed and no spaceships returned, the Truth became distorted, ossified, and finally lost in the twin decrepitudes of blind ritual and unquestioning faith. It was only now, as Earth entered its own space age, that humans were rediscovering their forgotten extraterrestrial inheritance.

Von Däniken found his evidence for ancient astronaut contact in any number of so-called 'ancient mysteries' whose existence modern science and archaeology have trouble explaining (but even that's debatable). A short list might include:

- the pyramids in Egypt
- the Gate of the Sun in the ruined city of Tiahuanaco in Bolivia
- ancient electric batteries found in Iraq
- a crystal skull unearthed in Guatemala (as seen in *Indiana Jones 4*)
- rock paintings of 'space-suited' beings in the Kimberley of Western Australia
- a stone frieze of a 'spacecraft' taking off in Lord Pakal's tomb in Palenque
- the giant statues of Easter Island
- a map of Antarctica made in medieval Turkey
- an ancient mechanical 'computer' found in a shipwreck in the Aegean Sea
- the Dogon people of Mali's remarkable knowledge of the star Sirius
- carvings of African warriors in the ruins of Monte Albán in Mexico
- and the biblical destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah.

I could go on. Von Däniken certainly does. 'As soon as we look at the past with our present-day gaze and use the fantasy of our technological age to fill up the gaps in it,' he writes, 'the veils that shroud the darkness begin to lift.' Ancient astronaut believers say that these otherwise unrelated mysteries only make sense when we admit that 'primitive' peoples could not have built such monumental structures or possessed such complex knowledge without the help of planet-hopping extraterrestrials. What begins

then as a haphazard collection of ancient mysteries is bolted together like Frankenstein's monster to form an alternate history of our world stretching from humanity's prehistoric origins to our ultimate destiny: the colonisation of outer space.

But I'm getting ahead of myself – before we could conquer outer space, our travellers' collective still had to get to Samaipata.

Truth be told, the 'El Fuerte' complex at Samaipata features fairly low on the list of 1001 Ancient Astronaut Sites to Visit Before You Die. Von Däniken himself rates it only in passing in *Chariots of the Gods?* – it wouldn't be until the publication of his 1973 book *In Search of Ancient Gods* that he revisited the Bolivian jungle to give a more detailed description of the isolated hilltop ruin. 'The pyramid [*sic*.] near Santa Cruz in Bolivia presents a special problem,' he declares, not the least being that there are in fact no pyramids at the site (that'd be either Mexico or Egypt, Erich).

Undaunted, the Swiss visionary pushes on with his trademark enthusiasm. 'It is a fairly symmetrical, apparently artificial mountain. Two deep bored grooves like launching ramps run from the bottom to the top of this mountain and end suddenly in mid-air. The Indians in the valley tell each other legends which recount that their gods ascended into heaven on "fiery horses" on these two grooves.' And what did mainstream archaeology have to say of El Fuerte's enigmatic existence? 'For once the archaeologists have no explanation of this', von Däniken writes primly.

But don't take his word for it – I certainly didn't, which was why I now found myself embarked on a highly strange quest into the Bolivian jungle with four unsuspecting companions in tow.

We left Santa Cruz the next morning in the middle of a shockingly, unexpectedly cold rainstorm. For a moment I thought we were back in the highlands, but a quick glance through

the bus's streaming windows revealed a vista of palm trees, tangled lianas and giant ferns, the office towers of the city centre behind us receding into the mist. This was most certainly the tropical lowlands, but the jungle was in the grip of a raging squall that wouldn't have been out of place on an early spring day in Melbourne, when cold south-westerlies sweep the flat lands surrounding Port Phillip Bay to bring the sting and shiver of the Southern Ocean.

A woman sitting across the aisle from me noticed my surprise. '*Oye, chico*,' she said, 'the *surazo* has arrived. Do you know of the *surazo*?'

The surazo, I learnt, was a terrible invading wind from Argentina that descends upon the lowlands of Bolivia each winter. Far to the south, deepest Patagonia was sunk in the abyssal grip of ice and snow. Super-frigid blasts of wind blowing off the dry, katabatic slopes of the Andes begin their headlong rush over the Patagonian plain, unimpeded for hundreds of kilometres by any prominence higher than a shaggy guanaco. Combining in size and strength as it surges north, the surazo crosses the fertile Pampas and its cattle baron fiefdoms in a heartbeat, sweeping into Paraguay and the Chaco to finally buffet the Bolivian lowlands almost as far as Brazil. When the surazo strikes, the temperature in the jungle can drop some twenty degrees in a matter of minutes.

The battered little coach sped west through shantytowns that didn't so much hug the road as jostle and shove it like spectators at a *fútbol* match. Here were mechanic workshops that looked like graveyards where exhaust pipes went to die, open-air barbers that resembled the shearing pens of outback Australia, and an endless proliferation of food stalls hung with hand-drawn signs of grinning beef, pensive looking chickens and, most worryingly of all, anthropomorphic monkeys. The booming Santa Cruz region

drew Bolivia's poor from all corners of this most fragmented and state-less of Latin American nations. Barrel-chested highlanders could be seen alongside cinnamon-skinned *criollos* from the southern frontier and frizzy-haired Afro-Bolivians from the Andean foothills. It was like no place else in the country, and certainly not the capital La Paz, which was as much an ethnic Aymara city-state now as it had been before the Spanish arrived.

We climbed into the mountains, innumerable rows of damp green domes and great hunchbacked ridges. I was struck by how very much the opposite these lush inland foothills of the Andes were to those surrounding the Valley of Elqui on the Pacific coast, for it seemed that here on the road to Samaipata the jungle had won a decisive victory over the crystalline earth. Black cliffs broke the foliage here and there – the furrowed brows of defeated basaltic tyrants, as I fancied them to be – but in the main this was a verdant tropical world caught momentarily in the surreally cold grip of the surazo.

Samaipata had endured worse assaults over the centuries. The Chané people, the original builders of El Fuerte, frequently found themselves under attack by the restless Guarani nations of the south. The Incas came next, their imperial advance inexorable and inevitable, until finally checked by the Spanish in the late sixteenth century. But that was hardly the end of Samaipata's bloody history – Ernesto 'Che' Guevara, the Argentinean doctor turned pan-Latin American revolutionary, spent the last years of his life hiding out in the mountains around Samaipata, making a desperate but ultimately fruitless attempt to foment revolution among the Bolivian people. Although his final stand and place of execution was in nearby La Higuera, Samaipata was the scene of one of El Che's last armed raids.

'I saw them come into the plaza, the *argentino* and his guerrillas,' an old man I met in a *comedor* on the plaza told me later that

evening. Our collective was dining from a menu that featured some of the most highly strange Spanglish I'd yet had the fortune to come across. I had chosen (rather bravely I thought) the special of the day, 'The Bull He is Annoy.' This was a direct English rendition of *pique a lo macho*, one of the ubiquities of Bolivian cuisine that consisted of grilled strips of beef laid to rest on a bed of thick potato chips. The heaped plate was then splattered with liberal dashings of tomato sauce, mayonnaise and *salsa picante*, making the whole thing look like Jamie Oliver and Jackson Pollock had just had a nasty fight in the kitchen.

'What did Guevara do?' I asked between mouthfuls of beef and chips (my aged interlocutor was supping from a thin broth of uncertain provenance, a meal which suited his distinct lack of teeth).

The old man tossed his hand in the air dismissively. '*Nada!*' he snorted. 'Fired guns in the air. Threatened the mayor. Left.' The last either being a statement of Che's politics, or an arch comment on the revolutionary's success in implementing them (I later discovered that Che Guevara himself never set foot inside Samaipata; instead, he camped in the jungle outside while some of his guerrillas went into the town for medical supplies).

We gamely resolved to make an all out assault on the summit of El Fuerte the following morning. Despite a brief burst of sunshine after dawn, the surazo had mustered its forces and was remobilising for a spirited counter-attack. Squadrons of snub-nosed clouds were scudding over the mountains as we found the El Fuerte turnoff and began climbing onto the luxuriantly forested ridges above town. After days of relentless Patagonian rain the unsurfaced track beneath our feet had gone to viscous jelly three inches deep. We gingerly picked our way uphill as the promise of rain sharpened into a well-aimed threat.

Reputedly there are numerous ruins scattered over the hillsides around El Fuerte, including the Spaniards' first attempt to establish a mission in the area, but it was the summit of the hill, known locally as *el Cascabel* or 'the Rattle,' that was our goal, as it had been for von Däniken nearly forty years earlier. But I bet he hired a four-wheel drive to get there.

The archaeological site, when we reached it, was unattended. As the mists momentarily cleared before us, the Rattle revealed itself to be a high, exposed dome of rock, a monk's tonsured head with all the bumps and protuberances of phrenology.

As we drew closer, however, I felt compelled to revise this metaphor, for the dome was covered in many clearly pagan patterns and symbols. Sets of concentric circles etched deeply into the rock face were now overflowing with shining rainwater, which ran across the dome's surface like the seeping lifeblood of a giant, unseen being slumbering beneath our feet. A row of alcoves, each large enough to shelter a huddled human form, adorned the sides of the dome where the mummified bodies of chiefs and nobles were laid to rest, close to the Rattle's store of sacred power (as I later learned at the small museum back in Samaipata). And most striking of all, two long, straight parallel gouges – von Däniken's UFO 'launching ramps' – arced over the summit of the dome, flanked by twisting helical patterns that looked like a pair of intertwined thunderbolts. No, El Cascabel was no monkish pate – it was a jungle shaman's shaven head, encrypted with the cicatrices and tattoos of unknown power.

'So what d'ya reckon? Is it a UFO runway or what?' asked Bolivar, sideburns glistening in the fine rain.

'You've got to be joking,' said Flaco, adding with classic Australian directness, 'It'd have to be bloody tiny aliens to land up here. I reckon that von Däniken of yours was full of bullshit,

Plowman.' I shrugged noncommittally. I *had* told them not to expect any great revelations.

Personally, I agreed with Flaco – the Rattle could only be a UFO runway if the alien spacecraft were the size and weight of a child's pram. Hell, it wasn't even a good beacon from the air. As we sat there munching the bananas and oranges we'd bought in town earlier that morning, the mists closed in again over the hilltop in a textbook pincer movement. I could barely see my travelling comrades not five metres away, let alone a circling spacecraft seeking safe harbour.

El Fuerte was not the work of extraterrestrials, I decided. Von Däniken had seen the great dome, climbed over its surface, photographed it, but he had not been able to understand its meaning, and so had devised a story to make sense (to him at least) of its existence. It was this – von Däniken's perhaps excusable inability to uncover the original, lost significance of the rock – that resonated most deeply with me. As I stood on this exposed hilltop midway between the green immensity of the jungle and the jagged peaks of the cordillera, I was seized by the sense that El Fuerte had not been merely carved in stone. Rather, its surface had been *encoded* – and, like von Däniken before me, I didn't have the matching cipher to read it either.

Passing showers had attempted to cut off our retreat while we rested on the summit. Thanks to the mud and damn Quisling gravity, the return from El Fuerte proved far more difficult than the ascent – it was only a matter of time before one of us made a false step and lost their footing. Finally with a short cry of surprise Bolivar slipped and fell arse first in the mire. Cursing in embarrassment, he attempted to regain his feet but slipped again, sliding comically a few metres down the slope.

'Bravo! Well donn, Sheñor Bolivar!' called out the Dutch Captain, and a cheer went up from the rest of us. Bolivar grinned weakly. 'Any of you fuckers gonna help me up?' he said, flinging away the mud from his hands in disgust.

'Nah,' drawled his best mate, Flaco. He appeared to reconsider this for a moment, but then shook his head again. 'Nah,' he repeated to everyone else's delight.

As Bolivar unsteadily righted himself, the Young Professor assumed a thoughtful expression. 'A spectacular fall, if you don't mind me saying' – Bolivar scowled unappreciatively – 'but I had wagered Plowman here would be the first to go.'

'Hey!' I cried in indignation, and now Bolivar was chuckling with the others. 'What the hell's that mean?'

The Young Professor waved away my protests. 'Oh, nothing, don't take it seriously – just a little joke to make this clumsy fellow Bolivar feel better,' he smiled. I guessed he hadn't really meant the comment to be malicious, but it was the Dutch Captain who made an attempt at mollification.

'Don't worry, Maarten,' he said companionably. 'Itsh jusht becaushe you're alwaysh looking in the shky for the vlying shaucers. Maybe you're not looking at your veet, eh?'

As we resumed our descent I contemplated the possibility that my fellow travellers were perhaps jibing me for having brought them so far in such unforgiving conditions to see a ruin that was, let's face it, no Machu Picchu. But what we saw around the next bend in the road banished any such self-conscious brooding: about a hundred metres ahead a *colectivo* lay trapped in the mud, rear wheels spinning uselessly as a group of seven or eight young men attempted to push it free.

As we drew closer, however, it became apparent that this was no unlucky local bus going about its usual intervillage routes. The side of the vehicle was emblazoned with the device of a Catholic

college in Santa Cruz, and indeed the young men labouring in the mud were a group of high school boys in high spirits, perhaps sixteen or seventeen years old, all wearing identical navy blue school uniforms – more evidence that affluent Santa Cruz looked to North America and Europe for its images of cultural capital rather than its Latin American neighbours.

We waved and called out to the mud-spattered boys, who looked up at us with some surprise. But it was our turn to be taken aback next, for the Santa Cruz college was suddenly revealed to be coeducational. The bus's windows slammed open as wide as they could go and a dozen pony-tailed girls in the same school uniform stuck their heads out into the drizzling rain, shrieking and whistling wildly to gain our attention.

'*Oye, chicos! My name is Isabella!*'

'*A donde van, guapicitos?*'

'*Hello! Do you like this country Bolivia?*'

Feminine propriety cast aside, the schoolgirls clambered out of the bus and ran as best they could up the slope towards us, some of them nearly losing their footing as they came. The squealing mob couldn't have been more excited if U2 had parachuted into the jungle to save them from what was clearly a fate worse than death: the boredom of waiting for the bus to be unstuck from the mud.

'*Where are you from, English?*' one girl asked me (I couldn't tell if her question pre-empted my answer or whether she was expressing her preference for a language to converse in).

'*I like different boys!*' exclaimed another, this time directed at the two Queenslanders, who looked at each other as if to ask, 'Does she mean you or me?'

One girl produced a brand new and probably very expensive digital camera and proceeded to herd us into a tight group pose, two giggling female students for each bewildered traveller. '*Queso!*'

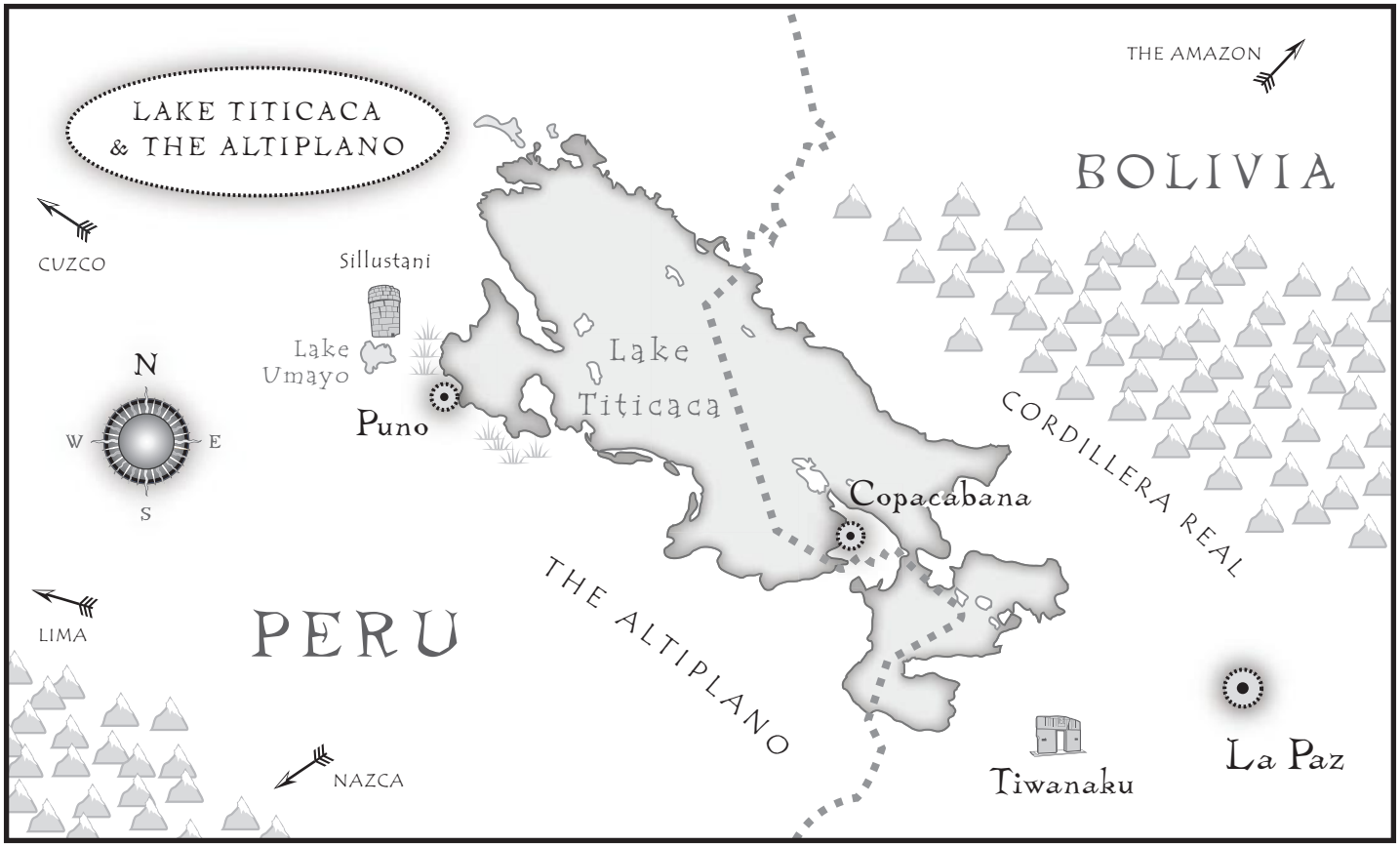
shouted the nubile photographer, and her friends squealed in appreciation of her interlingual wit.

Eventually the teacher – a rather pretty Bolivian woman herself who appeared hardly older than her wards – waded into the scrum, haranguing the girls and shooting us the kind of supremely distrustful glare reserved for unknown males of unstated intent that I'm sure is mandatory training in all Catholic teaching colleges. Meanwhile, the schoolboys persisted thanklessly in their labours throughout all this commotion, and just as we were about to offer the combined pushing power of our collective the drive wheels of the bus screeched loudly, finding purchase in the mud and causing the vehicle to lurch forward suddenly. The driver honked the horn in triumph, and a cheer went up from the now thoroughly dirty boys.

'*Vale! Escucha me!*' cried the teacher. 'Everybody back on the bus now! Everybody! And no, *they* cannot come with us,' she added with a scowl in our direction. Amidst vocal protestations and groans the underage debutantes trooped obediently back into the bus.

'*Goodbye North Americans!*' cried one girl as the bus pulled out of sight around the corner. We were left standing dumbfounded in the middle of the road.

'What just happened?' I said aloud. It wouldn't be the last time I'd ask this question on my journeys in search of high strangeness, but it did occasion me to breathe a profound sigh of relief; for if that school bus had remained stuck in the mud for much longer I fear I might well have ended my travels in South America as the shot-gun son-in-law of some beetle-browed Santa Cruz coca lord.


LAKE TITICACA
& THE ALTIPLANO
THE AMAZON
BOLIVIA
CUZCO
Sillustani
Lake
Umayo
Puno
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Titicaca
N
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S
CORDILLERA REAL
Copacabana
THE ALTIPLANO
LIMA
PERU
NAZCA
Tiwanaku
La Paz

8

THE ALTIPLANO:
THE REAL HIGH STRANGENESS

Traveller collectives are always ephemeral associations, and eventually our band went their individual ways amid many fond farewells and swapping of email addresses. Armed with what I hoped was a renewed sense of purpose, I headed for the border with Peru. To get there I would have to cross the windswept plains and ranges of the highest and most extensive plateau on the continent.

The Altiplano: a huge empty space in the middle of South America, three thousand metres high and climbing. In the south lay the Salar de Uyuni, the planet's largest and highest salt flat; in the north, crammed into a five-hundred-metre-deep chasm, the world's highest capital city, La Paz; beyond that, the slumbering waters of Lago de Titicaca.

I came to rest at Copacabana, a small town on the Bolivian shore of Lake Titicaca. This ancient community is often the butt of foreigners' jokes, and yet it must be said to anyone wondering (as I did) that this Copacabana bears little resemblance to either the famous beach in Rio or the equally infamous Barry Manilow song about a nightclub and its romantically challenged denizens. The Bolivian Copacabana predates both these pretenders by

millennia; historians' best guess is that the town was named after Kotakawana, a pre-Columbian fertility goddess said to dwell in the lake.

The Spanish arrived in the mid-sixteenth century, seeking trade routes to the fabulously rich silver mines of what was then called Upper Peru. And then a miracle happened, literally. In a faultlessly performed Vision of the Madonna, an alien deity planted the flag of Catholicism in this holy city of the Aymara. Imagine the local shamans' surprise at coming to work one day, decked out in face paint and bags of hallucinogenic mushrooms, to find that overnight the Blessed Virgin had muscled in on their territory. Hedging their bets (and no doubt persuaded by the muskets and swords of the *conquistadores*), the local populace swapped one fertility goddess for another, and the Virgin of Copacabana has been the patron and protector of all Bolivians ever since. (Incidentally, the beach in Rio de Janeiro *was* named after this Bolivian Virgin when a small shrine was erected there in her honour in the seventeenth century, but I suspect Barry Manilow was just looking for somewhere that rhymed with 'Havana'.)

The rocky Cerro Calvario – the Hill of Calvary – rises above the town, forming a promontory that protects Copacabana from the winds blowing off the lake. From the Calvario's four-thousand-metre-high summit (which only stands some sixty metres above the lake shore, the Altiplano is that high already), you can see considerably further over the curvature of the planet – the waters of the lake stretch over the horizon in a perspective-bending trick to present a great inland sea sunk in the most profound depth of blue.

According to certain mystical lore collected by contactee guru George Hunt Williamson, deep beneath the lake lies a series of hermetically sealed crystalline caverns. Think of these unknown

spaces in the abyss as enormous encryption devices, formed either by design or geologic providence to store the sum of cosmic knowledge known by the Els, the Solar System's originary alien species. The data exists now solely in the form of pure sound, a perfectly balanced standing wave of information that endlessly echoes off the polished walls of the caves.

The question I would most love to ask George Hunt if he were still alive today is: how did the Els access the caverns beneath Lake Titicaca? And once they uploaded their wisdom there, how'd they get out again?

Ufologists chase a phantom object, whether it's an echo buried beneath the earth or a smudge on a photograph. Since Kenneth Arnold's sighting in 1947, ufologists have looked for UFOs in a great many strange places, but the UFO's native habitat remains that uncertain zone occupied by the so-called scientific anomaly: an object, phenomenon or experience that cannot be explained adequately by mainstream science. This concept of a meaningful anomaly is more than a simple oxymoron: for the UFO believer, scientific anomalies point towards a supposedly *more real* reality lurking beyond the frontiers of scientific knowledge. The harder an anomaly is to explain, the more meaningful it is to ufology.

But it wasn't always like this. Thinking about strange objects in the sky as anomalies is very much an artefact of the scientific worldview from which ufology has sprung like some sullen, rebellious child. Strange objects in the skies have been reported for millennia. The difference is that, with a few notable exceptions, prior to 1947 people who saw strange phenomena in the skies believed they were seeing *signs*. Listen to what these reliable witnesses, long gone to dust, have to say:

In around 593 BC the Jewish prophet Ezekiel, living in exile with the rest of his people in ancient Babylonia, reported a highly strange encounter near Tel-Abib on the floodplain of the Chebar River. 'As I looked, behold, a stormy wind come out of the north,' he begins, showing a flair for meter and alliteration sadly lacking in many modern UFO reports, 'and a great cloud, with brightness round about it, and fire flashing forth continually, and in the midst of the fire, as it were gleaming metal. And from the midst of it came the likeness of four living creatures. And this was their appearance: they had a human likeness, but each had four faces, and each of them had four wings. Their legs were straight, and the soles of their feet were like the soles of a calf's foot. And they sparkled like burnished bronze.' Ezekiel's take on his encounter: messengers of Yahweh come to tell him that the Jews would soon be released from bondage. Pretty weird stuff, even for the Old Testament.

AD 793, and the hairy and unwashed Anglo-Saxons are sitting around the fireplace swilling mead and generally taking it easy after a few centuries stuck in the unpleasant business of the Dark Ages. But then 'fiery dragons flying across the firmament' are seen in the skies off the east coast of England, and before the local soothsayer can say 'electromagnetic disturbances' the Vikings are turning up in their dragon-headed longships, looting and pillaging everything in sight. Coincidence? The monks who recorded the sightings in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* didn't think so. The gambolling 'dragons' were clearly a warning from God: 'You thought ABBA and Ikea were bad – wait until I unleash the Norsemen!'

January 3, 1569, and a burning star flares in the night sky over a Japan in the throes of civil war. A spacecraft from another planet observing the violent nature of Earthlings? Insolent fool!

Fall on your sword, masterless dog, that was a heavenly portent foretelling the fall of the Chu dynasty.

It's May 1917, and while the rest of Europe is at war, down in neutral Portugal three young children are tending sheep in the countryside. Ho, hum. But as the children pass the ancient Grotto of Santa Iria, a sudden burst of light blinds them. *Return to this place at the same time next month*, says a kindly-looking woman at the centre of the blaze. A lady Venusian with a message of peace? Almost, but not quite – this was the beginning of the famed Fátima visions of the Blessed Virgin Mary, recognised by the Catholic Church as a true-blue, bona fide, would-I-lie-to-you divine miracle.

None of these witnesses saw a UFO in the modern sense of the word, despite the fact that ufologists have since pored over old records and retroactively identified many hundreds of so-called 'historical' UFOs – including all the sightings above. But from the accounts they left behind it seems clear to me that, in their minds at least, these witnesses knew what they saw. Before 1947, people saw signs, portents and omens in the sky – the divine contacting the mundane. After 1947, strange things in the sky became the unknown, perhaps unknowable, UFOs.

The point here isn't anything as banal as 'we all see what want to see'; rather it's that, when faced with something unexplainable, humans are gripped by the need to make sense of the encounter and will turn to the interpretive tools they have on hand. Those Anglo-Saxon monks may well have seen real dragons – I wasn't there myself and besides, I wouldn't want to cross a man in a cassock – but even if this were the case it was the interpretation they gave to this event that turned an unexpected, unknown phenomenon into a meaningful sign.

According to ufology, then, what do all these objects have in common? Four-headed angels, fire-breathing dragons, shooting

stars, Marian visions . . . The unsatisfying and yet most logical answer is nothing, and precisely nothing at all: today, in the era of ufology, all they share is a sense of anomaly, of being out of place in the sky, out of place in our knowledge of the world, without place in this world at all. Although I stand by my statement that none of those historical witnesses saw a UFO, on the other hand they all saw the same thing as modern-day UFO witnesses: a piece of the real shooting down from the sky, throwing the normal functioning of the world into chaos.

The big difference is that before 1947 witnesses didn't feel the need to explain everything – the hows and whys of a sign from the gods could be left up to the gods; for mortals it was the *message* that counted. Since 1947, the luxury of that particular *deus ex machina* is no longer with us. UFOs are UFOs because they can't be fully explained, and that is how they will remain. Many commentators like to loudly proclaim that people believe in UFOs because they no longer believe in God, that in the absence of a divine plan the masses need *something* to believe in; but I say UFOs are not an alternative to religion, they're simply proof that faith is always grounded on something non-existent.

Speaking of the anomalous, UFOs have always been a little strange. Since 1947 witnesses have reported UFOs in an astonishing array of forms, including, but far from limited to, dinner plates, punch bowls, beachballs, giant cigars, crescent moons, ghost rockets, clothes irons, translucent spheres, soap bubbles, tiny bright lights, the planet Saturn, giant eggs, flying crosses, baseball caps and more. Did I mention beachballs?

In the 1950s ufologists still dared to speak of UFOs with the definite article, indicating their singular, unique origin – it was *the* flying saucers are real, *the* flying saucers are from outer

space, and anyone who said otherwise was either a communist or a contactee, or both. Enterprising nuts-and-bolts ufologists produced wall charts depicting flying saucers in silhouette for fast and easy recognition: manned scout craft, remote-control surveillance drones, interstellar motherships, Daylight Discs and Nocturnal Lights (original UFO charts are now as rare as first edition copies of Hitler's diaries, and can sell for many thousands of euros on the international grey market).

But no amount of cataloguing, typecasting and retrofitting could contain the unfathomable variety of reports pouring in from witnesses. As the 1960s rolled on, ufologists began to notice that more and more witnesses reported encounters with highly strange and threatening entities that, despite their oftentimes-comical descriptions, were experienced as deeply disturbing events. What sense, for instance, could ufologists hope to make of the following Close Encounters of the Weird Kind:

> Moonshine country, Kentucky, 1955. A backwoods clan straight out of a Appalachian folklorist's wet dream endure a terrifying night besieged in their log cabin by four foot tall, flap-eared glow-in-the-dark 'goblins' that emerge silently from the woods moments after a brightly lit object lands nearby. The menfolk defend their families and property with shotgun blasts from behind barricaded windows, but the 'goblins' appear impervious to the pellets and when hit make a metallic *ping!* noise before slowly floating to the ground like a dry leaf in autumn.

> A Nevada highway, 1960. A woman catches sight of a strange being in her headlights: about three feet tall, broad-shouldered and long-armed like an ape, it has a head shaped like a pumpkin and appears to be covered in dark fur.

> Cisco Grove, California, 1964. A hunter in the woods becomes separated from his companions. Shortly after dusk he notices a bright light approaching through the forest. Becoming alarmed, the hunter hides in the branches of a nearby tree. Two humanoid figures emerge from the woods from the direction of the light, now revealed to be a dome-shaped craft hidden among the trees. The two entities regard the man intently, making hooting noises to each other. A third, altogether more sinister creature lumbers into the clearing, crushing bushes and small trees underfoot. It is dark grey, almost black, and has no discernible neck. Two glowing red eyes flicker in the darkness. Its 'mouth' extends right across the creature's head, snapping open and shut like a steam shovel. Throughout the night the three entities terrorise the hapless hunter. The larger 'robot' creature (as the hunter later describes it) repeatedly 'gasses' the hunter with noxious fumes issuing from its great mouth. Strapping himself to a branch with his belt, the hunter bravely fights back, shooting the 'robot' with his hunting bow (the arrows bounce off) and then lighting pieces of his clothing and hurling them at his alien assailants. Finally, just as dawn is breaking, a second 'robot' appears. A great cloud of gas engulfs the hunter, causing him to pass out. When he regains consciousness the entities and their craft have departed; the hunter quickly regains his bearings and retraces his steps to the original campsite, where his two companions have spent an anxious night. Exhausted and in shock, the hunter recounts his nightmarish story; his friends believe him, for they too saw the light gliding through the woods the night before.

Ufologists could no longer pretend there wasn't a problem with searching for unexplained anomalies in order to explain the

anomalies they already had. In the face of mounting absurdity, they began talking about scales of strangeness to describe the content of UFO sightings. If the classic flying saucers of the 1950s now registered at the low end of the strangeness range, the bizarre and often terrifying sightings increasingly being reported became known as *high strangeness*. Because high strangeness did not conform to any recognisable pattern, some ufologists came to believe, albeit reluctantly, that the only hidden meaning behind high strangeness was precisely that *there was no hidden meaning*.

In Copacabana I settled in to do some reading. Some travellers will stow away a formal shirt and tie or a little black dress in case they're called to attend a state dinner or wedding while abroad. Me, I stockpiled books at the bottom of my pack, the ballast that kept me on even keel as I pitched about the arduous seas of travel.

I drew these books out now: George Hunt Williamson's *Road in the Sky*, John A. Keel's *The Mothman Prophecies*, and a minor piece of populist ephemera by the celebrated scholar of Old English, J.R.R. Tolkien. (This was of course *The Lord of the Rings*, given to me by a German backpacker named Willi who I met on the cargo boat *Avraham-Moisés*. 'I cannot believe you have never read the most famous novel in your English language,' he said to me in his clipped and precise command of, yes, my English language. I promised to read his dog-eared omnibus copy before I left the continent. Willi, if you're out there, *mein lieber Freund*, you can have your copy back any time you want, just let me know.)

Despite possessing a passing resemblance to a hobbit myself, I found myself drawn instead to the feverish pages of Keel's classic of ufological writing. This was one of the UFO books I saw on Asco's bookcase that night, so long ago it now seemed. I'd already read *The Mothman Prophecies* several times over, but

here in Copacabana I was gripped with a powerful conviction that this book would somehow provide the key to understanding the power of the real when it came to UFOs. Reluctantly, I put aside Willi's copy of *The Lord of the Rings* and plunged into Keel's nightmarish vision of a world cut loose from its moorings.

Keel's book tells the story of one of ufology's most infamous flaps, which began near the small town of Point Pleasant, West Virginia, with the sightings of a bizarre entity that came to be known as Mothman. Between November 1966 and December 1967, more than one hundred witnesses would report seeing Mothman. As Keel tells it:

> Those who got a close look at it all agreed on the basic points. It was gray, apparently featherless, as large – or larger – than a big man, had a wingspan of about ten feet, took off straight up like a helicopter, and did not flap its wings in flight.

Chased along quiet country roads or besieged in their homes, Mothman's witnesses reported an unreasoning fear of the creature. Surprised by Mothman in her driveway, one woman dropped her small child and 'stood transfixed, hypnotized by the blazing red circles on the top of the towering, headless creature. Its great wings unfolded slowly behind its back.' The witness's neighbour grabbed the paralysed woman and her child and dragged them into the house, bolting the door behind them. There was a sound on the porch and the terrified women saw two red eyes peering in at them through the window.

In addition to Mothman itself, hundreds of reports were also made of UFOs, Men-in-Black, poltergeist activity and extraterrestrial contact. Keel spent the better part of a year in the uncertain ontological regions of the flap zone. 'I am no longer particularly interested in the manifestations of the phenomenon,' he declared. 'I am pursuing the source of the phenomenon itself.

To do this, I have objectively divorced myself from all popular frames of reference.' And so his problems began.

Keel would find no hidden truth behind the visitations, a symbolic failure that he never fully recovered from. His writing teeters dangerously between manic glossolalia and existential paralysis, making it near impossible to read the book without inducing a sense of plummeting vertigo. Ultimately, Keel could only talk about Mothman as if it were what Lacan sometimes called a *master signifier*, a highly strange *thing* without any reference point in the normal world, a *thing* that makes its presence felt even though nothing coherent or meaningful can be said about it.

This explains why none of the witnesses Keel interviewed could describe the entity's features. 'Its face was a puzzle,' Keel writes in exasperation. 'No-one could describe it. The two red eyes dominated it.' Look closely, but not too close: the creature's eyes are the alien gaze of high strangeness staring back at you.

As he continued to fall deeper and with mounting velocity into a well of darkling paranoia and inaccessible meanings, Keel began to question his psychological state, fearing that prolonged exposure to high strangeness was turning him into a 'raving paranoiac.' More ominously, his friends and informants began to suffer from prophetic dreams of rushing water and people screaming.

In desperation Keel sought a key to understanding these frightening signs, only to find it in the one senseless event that, in its horror and randomness, transcended Mothman's terrifying presence: the collapse of the Silver Bridge over the Ohio River at Point Pleasant on 15 December 1967.

From an uninvolved viewpoint there is no particular reason why this disaster took place, other than mundane engineering factors like stress fractures in the bridge's girders, or that it was overburdened with cars full of Christmas shoppers, and so on.

Fifty-two people died in the river that night, some whose bodies were never found.

The prophecies in the title of his book refer to Keel's belief that Mothman was somehow responsible for the disaster even though, for unfathomable reasons of its own, the highly strange entity tried to warn him of the impending tragedy. But here Keel falls right into the trap of explaining one unknown in terms of another – Mothman only makes sense when explained in terms of the Silver Bridge collapse (a random accident), but the Silver Bridge collapse only makes sense when it is explained in terms of Mothman's prophecies (the face of high strangeness). This is an either/or explanation: only one of these two things can make sense at a time – Mothman or the Silver Bridge collapse – but never both together. For Keel as much as the poor fools like myself who try to make sense of his story, Mothman's true purpose remains irretrievably lost in the unknown, perhaps unknowable, world of high strangeness.

It was up to Hollywood to give Mothman a more meaningful role in the history of ufology. The film version of *The Mothman Prophecies* came out in 2002; it bore little resemblance to the book, transforming Keel's descent into high strangeness into a by-the-numbers Hollywood story of true love lost and found again, with a visual and narrative style heavily influenced by *The X Files*. I'm not saying it was a bad film; at least Richard Gere made a good-looking ufologist.

I don't believe that John A. Keel was ever going to discover the 'truth' behind Mothman. Instead, I fear that Keel allowed himself to get too close to the real thing.

If you come to ufology with the intent to get to the source of UFOs, to divorce yourself from 'all popular frames of reference'

as Keel set out to do, the results are catastrophic: the normal picture of 'reality' evaporates into an indecipherable mass of signs all pointing to each other but offering absolutely no sense of direction. Lacan called this sort of experience *subjective destitution*, and it is a point of no return. After this moment nothing can ever seem fully real again – there will always be a sense that *something else* exists, just beyond the surface of things. Ufology is full of accounts of this kind, most often seen in the reports of witnesses trying to come to terms with their experiences and failing. By the time the Mothman flap was over, Keel had literally fallen into the maelstrom of high strangeness.

For me, *The Mothman Prophecies* posed a timely warning. I'd never seen a UFO and had no desire to do so, but nonetheless I'd been reading UFO accounts a little too closely, thinking about UFOs a little too much. Somehow I'd become this lost Melmoth of the internet age, holed up in a five-dollar-a-day boarding house on the shores of Lake Titicaca and looking down the barrel of my research to face what had become an obsession. I had no real business travelling in these far-flung parts of the world, interviewing UFO witnesses and making pilgrimages to ufology's sacred sites. My research, even one dealing with subject matter as outré as mine, could be completed successfully without ever travelling further than the campus library. I knew this, but refused to acknowledge the truth in it.

Right. In Copacabana I made a resolution: I would not follow in Keel's footsteps. I would not go down his path. I don't want to believe, and I never have – UFOs were nothing but little bits of the real, which is to say they were nothing at all.

Time to move on. I felt the pull like a bronze bell tolling in the night. I was not a ufologist; I was not in South America to investigate UFO sightings. But there were still a few places I wanted – needed? – to see for myself . . .

From Copacabana I made a short jump over the border to the Peruvian town of Puno on the western shore of Lake Titicaca, a low-lying coastline of swamps and rush-filled lagoons. The weather had changed rapidly while I was in customs, coalescing into a rolling mass of cloud moving with murky intent across the surface of the waters. A minor blizzard, but one no less belligerent for that, was on its way, and I checked into my lodgings in Puno as the first snowflakes began to fall.

A few hours later the skies cleared, and I went out into the streets to see what the blizzard had left in its wake. Families had gathered in the central plaza, which now lay under soft inches of powdery snow. The snowballs flew back in forth in front of the baroque cathedral and its carefully tended topiary, rival gangs of children squealing with delight as their parents looked on indulgently. Coming from a country famous for its long hot summers, I found myself enjoying a scene that was for me something of a novelty.

'Have you not seen snow before?' said a man standing next to me, a father with his young son in tow. The man smiled warmly. Both he and his son were tightly wrapped in woollen scarves and beanies, making them look like they were on their way to a football match.

'No, not like this,' I replied. 'I mean, never in a city before, not with all these people about,' I added.

The young father nodded. 'We have not had so much snow in Puno for many years,' he said, grinning in pleasure. Then, with a slight pause as if weighing his words carefully, he asked, 'Excuse me, but are you from Brazil?'

It was perhaps the least probable question I could imagine under the circumstances. 'No, I'm Australian!' I told him. He

raised his eyebrows in surprise. 'What made you think that?' I asked, curious now.

The man shrugged shyly. '*Bueno*, well, it never snows in Brazil . . . and your accent, if you forgive me for saying so, sounds like the Brazilians I see on television.' His son looked at me gravely. It may not have been such a bad guess, I reflected later; many Brazilians have European ancestry like myself, and the Brazilian form of Portuguese is distinguished by its highly nasal pronunciation, a phonetic trait shared by the notoriously flat Australian accent.

'I did not mean to pry,' the man was saying, but I shook my head and said, '*No te preocupes, amigo*' – the Spanish equivalent of that great Australian panacea of a phrase, 'No worries, mate.'

The following morning I joined a small tour group heading out to the Sillustani archaeological site, perhaps a half hour drive from Puno. Sillustani is a pre-Inca ceremonial centre perched on a rocky headland overlooking Lake Umayo, a much smaller body of water some twenty kilometres west of the great Titicaca. The site contains the ruins of a dozen or so *chullpas*, stone funerary towers marking the graves of nobles of the ancient Colla people. Many hundreds of chullpas survive throughout southern Peru, but those at Sillustani are among the most beautiful and best preserved – great round towers of dark stone seamlessly fitted together, looking like a cross between a castle turret and a factory chimney stack. Our guide patted the side of the largest chullpa with proprietary affection. 'Very old,' he told us. 'Before the Spanish, before the Incas.'

At the close of the official part of the tour, the group was allowed to wander freely through the snow-covered grounds, snapping pictures of the towers rising starkly out of the white landscape. I chose this moment to approach the guide with what

had become my standard question: did he know of any local UFO stories connected with Sillustani?

The guide, an Aymara man dressed in a thick alpaca wool sweater and a Chicago Cubs baseball cap, seemed embarrassed, professing no knowledge of *los OVNIs*. What about other legends or strange stories associated with the chullpas? I suggested. On this ground he had surer footing, and launched enthusiastically into a tale as complicated as any *telenovela* about a beautiful Colla princess, her lover and a magic whistle that caused the lake to rise, drowning a great palace that still rested at the bottom of the waters that lapped Sillustani's rocky shore. (Actually, that's only an imaginary reconstruction – my Spanish at the time was serviceable but far from perfect, while the guide's was modulated by a heavy Aymara accent, the indigenous language spoken by something like two million people in the Peru-Bolivia border region around Lake Titicaca. Let's just say my version is in the spirit of the guide's tale, if not the text).

The guide finished his story and made his polite (if somewhat hasty) departure to attend to the other tourists vying for his attention. Brushing away my irritation at having made the guide uncomfortable, I set off for a circuit around the site myself. More grey clouds were moving in from the east, and the temperature was dropping steadily. I guessed it would snow again soon.

The chullpas seemed even more surreal against the rapidly whitening sky. For a moment I forgot what they were, that these stone towers had been built by people, that they once housed the mortal remains of great warriors, powerful nobles, imperial administrators and wise seers. The chullpas suddenly shifted out of the world for a short moment. I now saw the stone pillars as organic, tumescent growths that had pushed up from the chthonic depths of the earth just that morning, seeking aerial sustenance from the sun's rays and precious moisture from the melting snow.

For a short moment I saw the chullpas not as others perceived them, but as shadows cast by the real.

Across the snow a figure now approached me. A man, a European, clad in a light jacket and tan trousers. Blurred but strong features: large ears, nose, lips. Thick glasses. A cigarette between his fingers, then to his mouth; the tip burns bright but does not ash. I notice he leaves no footprints in the snow.

We stare at each other for a moment. Master and student, theoretician and traveller, walking metaphor and uncertain narrator. I will not speak first.

Trés bien, the figure says. *What is the real?*

The real is that which we can't talk about, I answer.

Wrong! You just spoke its name then! What is the real?

That which escapes the act of representation.

Wrong! The real has no desire, how can it want to escape? Again, what is the real?

I don't know.

Wrong again – you do know what the real is. In its presence there can be no mistake that it is there.

It is not god. It does not want, does not know something we do not, does not care who we are.

The real does not exist, but without it neither do we. We need it; we pursue it. Without it we have only signs and more signs. It is the guarantee that there is something else, something more.

But we must not achieve it. Attaining the real will destroy everything. Reveal its emptiness, its nothingness, and we fall into the void.

Everything depends on it remaining hidden, inaccessible, unreachable.

Do you understand?

No, I replied.

Correct, the figure said.

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9

NAZCA:
LINES IN THE SAND

Sprawling over five hundred square kilometres of coastal desert in southern Peru, the Nazca Lines are a collection of straight lines, geometric shapes, and human and animal figures carved into the rocky soil. These enormous forms stretch for hundreds metres across the desert floor, but are only fully revealed from the air.

The would-be anthropologist George Hunt Williamson (my second ufological guide in South America after Erich von Däniken), wrote in 1959 that the Nazca Lines must surely be 'beacons for the gods.' Earlier still, in 1954 British ufologist Harold T. Wilkins proposed in his largely forgotten masterpiece *Xenonomicon* that the Nazca Lines raised the 'startling and sensational query: were they not merely signals to the planets, or the sun, but indications to an interplanetary space ship where to land?'

Ironically, in the decades since ufologists first drew attention to Nazca, southern Peru has experienced an airborne invasion of strange, improbable beings more frightening than any Venusian or Martian. International tourists now descend upon Nazca in their thousands each year, only to ascend again in the hundreds of light aircraft that offer an ancient astronaut's eye-view of the Lines (or whatever passes for organs of sight among extraterrestrials).

I too would go to Nazca, for, as ufologists like to say, all Lines lead to Nazca.

Nazca was too far to reach from Puno in a day so I picked a town to stay overnight Womble-style, closing my eyes and pointing to a random place on the map. Chala, an unimpressive-looking dot on the coast, was closest to where my finger landed. Glad to be leaving the freezing Altiplano, I booked a berth on a great, wallowing Pequod of a bus that should have been decommissioned a century ago but was instead packed to the gunwales with Peruvians of all degrees of inclination, declination and sanitation. I sat next to an ancient woman in traditional garb who resolutely pretended I wasn't there. Sighing quietly to myself, I settled in for the ride.

The highway soon left the Altiplano and began dropping through a series of dramatically deep, boulder-strewn canyons, each drier than the last. After the blizzard in Puno I was looking forward to some balmy beach weather, but just as the *surazo* had brought bitter subpolar squalls to the Bolivian jungle, so too did the Peruvian coast confound my expectations.

My first glimpse of the sea was encompassed by a single word: greyness. Actually, make it two: high greyness. Grey waves washed listlessly over grey sand backing an ocean that looked exactly like a giant bowl of cold porridge with the skin forming on top, just the way I hate it. The whole dismal scene was hung over by a suffocating mantle of the kind of fog that shouldn't be seen outside of film adaptations of *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. Which Peru was this?

I was entering the zone of the *garúa*, an unbroken bank of fog that hangs over the Peruvian littoral for six months of the year. And yet practically no rain ever falls on this coast. Both climatic anomalies, I'm told, are caused by the Humboldt Current, a cold oceanic current rushing up the South American coast from Antarctica. In the season of the garúa, the sun virtually disappears, rising only as a pale halo in the clouds.

Clammy afternoon phased imperceptibly into chill night, and in the fog-laden darkness the bus crawled around every bend in the coast road like an overburdened llama with dropsy. I was dimly aware of high cliffs dropping into the ocean, but after a while I nodded off, only to be awoken an indeterminate period of time later by flashing streetlights as we sped through a town.

Feeling groggy and slow-witted, I stumbled up the baggage-strewn central aisle of the coach to where the driver sat ensconced in his bathysphere of glowing dials and fluorescent Madonnas. 'Was that Chala we just passed?' I asked.

'*Sí, sí,*' said the driver, not taking his eyes off the unlit road. '*Por qué?*' I explained that I'd bought a ticket for Chala.

'*Ay, carajo!*' gasped the driver in obvious consternation. '*We must go back!*'

I've rarely felt such suspense as I experienced in the following minutes. And I mean suspended, literally – unable to see in the darkness, the driver began executing what soon became nothing less than a nine-point turn that had the rear of the bus swinging out precariously over the unfenced drop into the ocean. At any moment I expected a sugar-cane-laden road train or some other murderous agent of unstoppable momentum to come hurtling around the bend and strike us broadsides, snapping the aged Pequod in two. Perhaps *two* semi-trailers would hit us, one from each direction to make sure the job was done properly, I fantasised helplessly.

A sickly sheen of perspiration glazed the driver's brow. 'Be there soon,' he whispered hoarsely over his shoulder as the great beast finally began rolling back down the Panamericana toward the flickering string of lights below.

Chala should've been a sandpapered nub of a town, but as the bus pulled into the settlement I saw that a riotous street party was in full swing. Dozens of drunken men were milling about, moving

from one drinking establishment to the next. Their uniform was denim overalls, grey woollen jumpers and dusty baseball caps; steel-capped boots completed and enhanced the look of men used to heavy manual labour. As I stared through the greasy bus window, one knot of carousers broke into a full-blown fistfight. The driver slowed to walking pace to avoid revellers stumbling across his path, before pulling into the town's petrol station.

'What on Earth is going on here?' I asked, aghast. The driver looked up at me in surprise.

'*Los mineros*,' he replied. 'The miners are in town for the festival. Isn't that why you wanted to come to Chala?'

It was my turn to show incomprehension. 'Do I look like a miner to you?' I asked.

'But the festival . . .' he began, trailing off into uncertainty. Suddenly he leapt to his feet. '*Amigos,* we've arrived at Chala!' he announced sprightly, waking a few sleeping passengers for good measure. 'Get your bags, *joven!*'

Chala was named after the Incas' word for the desert coast, I later discovered. Tonight, however, it was overflowing with hard liquor and equally hardened drinkers. Pisco, aguardiente, chicha, beer and other less savoury distillations commingled with the ambient garúa to foment a brew three parts exuberance, two parts hopelessness, and about ten parts unfocused aggression. I never did discover what manner of mother lode drew so many working men to the coast. Perhaps the miners had broken through the layers of rock and silica to stumble across a subterranean reservoir of *alcohol puro* so vast it stretched for unknown leagues beneath the desert, enough to fuel all of South America's *colectivos* and *camiones* for centuries. I can imagine the miners looking at each other and thinking, *either a petrochemical company gets this, or we have the fiesta to end all fiestas.* Chala, the most nondescript and necrotic port on the coast, is chosen as the site of their celebrations.

I gingerly picked a path through the throng. My backpack and European features should have identified me as an outsider, but the drunkenness of the miners draped me in a veil of anonymity as effectively as it immersed the revellers in a well of incoherency. One miner, who looked about forty-five but was probably nineteen, called out to me, 'Hey José, how you doing, you *gran cabrón!*' which was very companionable of him, if completely mistaken.

On the beach side of the Panamericana sat a large and squat building that had the distinctive, uninviting look of a *hotel turístico*. I rapped on the front door three times, then three times again. The resolution to sleep on the beach was reluctantly forming in my mind when the door creaked open a furtive inch. '*Sí, señor?*' said a male voice.

'*Buenas noches*,' I said to the suspicious night porter, pressing on quickly before he could have second thoughts. 'Look. I'm not a miner, I'm not drunk, and I'm not from around here. But I need a room for the night. Do you have any vacancies?'

The night porter opened the door an inch further. 'Is it just you? Nobody else?'

'No,' I replied. 'Just me. Everywhere else in town is booked out.' Which was a supposition rather than a lie, but almost certainly the truth.

The night porter made up his mind in a short heartbeat. 'Come inside, quickly now!' he said, literally pulling me through the doorway and slamming it shut fast behind me.

'*Muy bien*,' he said, looking me up and down with obvious relief. 'You really aren't a miner. You can have the Miramar room.'

Next morning dawned dull and grey, the garúa hanging in the air like curdled milk through water. I sipped a drip filter *americano* with lots of sugar on the hotel's waterfront terrace, studying an ocean devoid of movement. Neither ship nor beast broke its gently lapping surface, but this coast couldn't be an utter

desert, I reasoned, for the black-feathered Nazgûlian vultures that I'd seen all along the Pacific coastline still circled low overhead.

Everybody in Chala was suffering from a hangover except me and the night porter, who was now fast asleep, effectively leaving me to my own devices in the otherwise empty hotel. The transformation from the saturnalia of the night before was uncanny in the extreme – it was as if I'd walked into one of those post-apocalyptic last-man-alive movies where everyone except the unwitting protagonist has gone blind or turned into zombies or worse (what's worse than zombies? A pisco sour hangover, probably – all that albumen from the egg whites can't be good for you.)

I took a walk along the beachfront in the hope of washing away the listlessness of the place, but if anything the prospect from the grey sands was even more desolate. As I walked through the misty sea air I became aware of what I took to be a miner, clad in a leather jacket and lying asleep on the beach some fifty metres ahead. Two vultures had alighted near the huddled form and were eyeing the prize covetously, feathers ruffling in the light wind coming off the water. As I watched, one of the midnight black birds hopped casually onto the body and, with a vicious twist of its beak, tore away a long shred of flesh. The sodden form did not stir.

Bloated and fish-bitten horror gripped hold of me. 'Hey!' I cried out, almost involuntarily. I was certain of what lay before me: some poor miner snuffed out by drunken misadventure or perhaps just plain despair, inhaled day in day out like a noxious miasma rising from the sandy wastes of this eclipsed shore. I broke into a run, calling out again in the hope of driving away the gathering carrion feeders.

I'd covered half the distance to the immobile form before realising my mistake. The vultures hopped away from the carcass,

eyeing me with the patience of the natural born scavenger; in their world it made perfect sense that the larger, more assertive predator fed first, leaving behind the skin and bones and bloody remnants for smaller, less wasteful creatures to bicker over.

There was as yet no smell of corruption. The dead seal (for that is what it was) must have washed up on the beach only that morning, for its soft, exposed parts, the eyes and muzzle, were still intact. The incipient nausea at the thought of finding a human corpse on the beach subsided, but nonetheless I felt a terrible sadness looking down at the dead animal. Had it swum to shore in the knowledge that it was dying? Or had it drowned before it could reach the grey sand, the cold waters of the oceanic current calmly and purposelessly throttling the sleek creature out of existence?

I left the body of the seal to the ministrations of the plague-doctor birds. A narrow set of steps cut into the cliff brought me back onto the main strip of Chala. One of these humble shacks, I saw, styled itself a *cevichería*. Considered to be the representative *plato típico* of coastal Peru in the way that *cuy*, or roast guinea pig, is the regional delicacy of the Andes, ceviche is essentially raw fish marinated in a potent mixture of lime juice and chillies. The citric acid and capsaicin effectively cook the flesh without the application of heat – or at least that's the idea, for I'd heard many vivid travellers' stories describing the colourful aftermath of indulging in ceviche made from the catch of, well, some other day.

Macabrely enough, after witnessing the scene of ecological completion on the beach below, I had become quite ravenously hungry. Somehow it seemed apt and fitting that, like the vultures swarming on the grey sands (now stained red with pinniped blood, no doubt), I should also partake of the raw flesh of a dead sea creature. I took a seat on the cevichería's terrace and ordered a bowl from the young girl waiting on the empty tables.

The ceviche turned out to be delicious – and also very, very hot, the sliced chillies screaming out a red klaxon against the white flesh of the fish. The dish was topped with chopped coriander and the toasted kernels of an overlarge variety of corn, which I crunched between my teeth as if they were peanuts. 'This is really very nice,' I told the young waitress between mouthfuls, and indeed some weeks later when I ate at a cevichería in Callao, Peru's main port and reputedly the home of the best ceviche in the country, I was forced to admit that the ceviche served in Chala, a town otherwise so poorly favoured by nature and the attentions of humans, was the superior one.

The coach for Nazca pulled in later that day. The Panamericana left Chala behind as if it too couldn't wait to get out of that dismal place, climbing quickly out of the coastal fog and onto a rocky desert plain where the air was lucid and precise. My spirits lifted at the sight of the Andes again, which though still as dry as the slopes of a lunar crater were a reminder that this was but the edge of a continent overspilling with life, stretching for thousands of kilometres across cordillera, high plains, forests and rivers to the verge of another ocean.

The Panamericana runs right through the plain of Nazca, actually cutting one of the Lines in two, but from ground level the terrain was unreadable. The town of Nazca itself emerged over the rim of the plain like the oasis it is, cultivated and maintained by countless generations of desert people.

As the bus pulled into the dusty concrete terminal dozens of men surrounded the vehicle like vultures around roadkill, jostling and shouting for the passengers' attention.

'Hello, hello, hotel, hotel!'

'*Oye señores, yo conozco al mejor hotel, camas comodas y tarifas baratas.*'

'American? French? Where are you from? I have pilot who speaks your language.'

These were Nazca's infamous touts, fabled across the continent for their tenacity and sheer inventive bravado in conning unsuspecting tourists to give up sizeable wads of cash for hotels with views of the Nazca Lines (in the picture frame hanging in the lobby), aerial tours that fly closer to the Lines than anyone else (because the plane never leaves the ground), and restaurants that serve authentic Peruvian roast guinea pig (think of another small furry rodent).

I had no way of telling who to trust and who to simply hand my wallet over to and be done with it. I watched a middle-class Peruvian couple being led away by a beaming man who had the look of having just bagged himself a pair of suckling pigs. Indecision being the whore of uncertainty, I did the only sensible thing that came to mind – I hid inside the bus terminal, ordered a *café corto*, and waited for the scrum outside to dissolve.

When I came back out there were only a few men remaining. One caught my eye straightaway, a tall, *criollo*-looking man in sunglasses and a brown turtleneck, smoking a cigarette languidly. While the other touts were all manic facial expressions and hysterical Spanglish, this guy looked like he didn't need the business – he'd just come down for the sport. He sized me up coolly and said in clear Peruvian *castellano*, 'You look like you need a hotel, my friend.'

Moments later, as we walked back to the hotel, I asked the tout his name.

'You can call me El Jefe,' he said easily. I laughed; *el jefe* means 'the boss.' 'The boss of what?' I asked in friendly tones.

'The boss of many things,' he grinned back. 'Maybe the boss of you.'

Over the following days I spent in Nazca I would often see El Jefe around town, a gaggle of bewildered tourists in tow behind him. Or he might be glimpsed engaged in serious conversations in the marketplace, at the airfield, at the taxi rank. The man had an undeniable air of unhurried ruthlessness about him, and when he inevitably booked my flight over the Lines I'm certain that for a few extra Peruvian *soles* he could've arranged for a fellow passenger to be *dropped off* somewhere along the way, mid-flight.

To date, no single, undisputed explanation for the Nazca Lines has been accepted by archaeologists. Most agree that the carvings held religious and/or astronomical significance for the ancient Nazca culture, which flourished on the dry desert plain between 200 BC and 700 AD. Such knowledge was already lost, however, by the time of the Spanish conquest in the sixteenth century. The Lines were only rediscovered in the 1920s, when pilots noticed the strange markings from the air.

The little single engine Cessna lifted off from the Nazca airfield. Behind us, the next aircraft was already taxiing into position. The pilot had taken a liking to me, and I was given the front passenger seat from where I had a gloriously unimpeded view of the landscape below. The French couple in the back could only crane their necks to peer obliquely out of the side windows. *Mal chance, mes amís!*

The Cessna climbed rapidly. From the air the desert's ancient dryness appeared etched in the riverbeds of the plain below, which weren't so much empty as dead, the skeletal remains of a distant, wetter epoch of the earth. And then, just like that, the Lines became visible.

Even though I'd seen literally hundreds of photos of the giant geoglyphs, the Nazca Lines are just one of those things

that make you wonder how unexpectedly strange humans can be. I do not think aliens had anything to do with Nazca; given enough time, enough labour and *enough of a good reason*, whatever that might be in a given culture and era, people can do anything. No, the greatest anomaly for me wasn't so much how the Lines were built, but rather that they simultaneously exist and yet *also do not exist*. Between the fall of the ancient Nazca culture and the invention of aircraft – that's around twelve hundred years – the Nazca Lines did not exist for humans, in a symbolic kind of way at least. Presumably, for reasons of their own, that's the way the ancient Nazca people designed them. A person can walk across the plain today and never see what lies beneath their feet. It's simple but it's freaky: from the ground the Lines do not exist, from the air they do.

Von Däniken fixated on the carvings because he thought they were intended for passing extraterrestrial craft. 'Seen from the air,' he writes in *Chariots of the Gods?*, 'the clear-cut impression that the 37-mile long plain of Nazca made on *me* was that of an airfield!' Like so many of ufology's theories, the Nazca Lines justify the existence of extraterrestrials only given that the existence of extraterrestrials justifies the Lines in the first place.

In fact some of the carvings do look a bit like airstrips, but if so they send a confusing message to the heavens. Many of the Nazca Lines cross the path of others or else pay no heed to topographical features, running straight across rocky ridges and eroded gullies. Flying saucers following these directional beacons would rather quickly become entangled in the greatest freeway pile-up this side of Aldebaran.

And what of the animal and humanoid figures? Not even the most rabid sceptic could pretend such purposefully designed carvings were the result of freak geological or climatic phenomena. I couldn't help but marvel at how the ancient artists succeeded so

spectacularly in capturing these creatures' personalities without ever seeing the final, aerial result of their labours. The Monkey is full of simian vigour, its tail curled tight with prehensile strength, the Hummingbird strains for the flower, and the Spaceman is clearly waving to the heavens. I wave back.

Ufologists rarely mention these zoomorphic 'Lines' of Nazca. What, then, were the ancient Nazca people trying to tell the extraterrestrials here? 'Yep, we got monkeys. Lots of monkeys.' I'd have guessed a xyrillium refuelling station might be more useful for interstellar spacecraft, but maybe I read too much science fiction.

The Nazca Lines are really quite unlike UFOs. They are not highly strange. UFOs burst into the world as unidentified objects demanding explanation, but these so-called ancient mysteries were *not* mysterious for their original builders. The people who made the Nazca Lines knew why they were taking on such a colossal task – it's just that *we* don't.

It's the implication that ancient, pre-technological and, let's face it, non-Western peoples were *too primitive* to construct such wonders without extraterrestrial help that I have in the crosshairs of my neocolonialist-agenda-piercing sniper rifle. Once you strip back the Boys' Own veneer of exotic adventures in distant lands, ancient astronaut theories are saying this: what you thought was your religion, your belief, your history, really belongs to someone else – aliens, in fact.

I doubt whether Erich would agree with this assessment of his life's work. If I ever meet him, I may have to explain that I don't mean to say that *all* his books and travels in India and Peru and Columbia are just smokescreen for a super-inflated White Supremacist fantasy – only that sometimes the obvious explanation is the correct one.

On the morning of my departure from Nazca I ambled down to the hotel reception to settle my bill. The manager, an uncharming individual called Pancho, was on duty, watching a tiny black and white television behind the desk. 'Señor Martín,' he said with calculated insouciance, 'you're leaving today, right?'

'That's right, Pancho,' I affirmed. 'I'm here to pay my bill, which I can do just as soon as you direct me to the nearest ATM.'

Pancho looked at me quizzically. '*Cajero automatíco*?' he asked, using the Spanish name for an automatic teller. '*No hay*,' he said, shaking his head.

The first glimmers of apprehension began to steal over me. 'What do you mean, there aren't any?'

Pancho sat up in his chair, the television forgotten in a moment. 'I mean,' he said, looking at me as if I'd just threatened to punch him in his ample gut, 'there are no *cajeros automatícos* in Nazca. We don't have any.'

The news came as a surprise to me. Practically every town of any size in South America is fully equipped with both internet and automatic banking facilities, and Nazca, probably the most touristed place in the country after Cuzco and Machu Picchu, is hardly a backwater.

'Are you saying you can't pay?' he began, coming around the counter to stand toe to toe with me. 'You come down here after staying in my hotel and now you tell me you can't pay! What is this? You gonna just walk out of here, is that it? No way, amigo, no way!'

Pancho was livid. I did my best to reassure him that I really did want to pay, but without an ATM I didn't know how.

'Travellers' cheques? You got travellers' cheques?' I shook my head – travellers' cheques always seemed like more fuss than they

were worth, little better than a bourgeois superstition to ward against pickpockets and thieves.

'That's not good!' Pancho screeched. 'How are you going to pay me? Huh?'

I had no answer, but at that moment El Jefe swaggered through the lobby doors, eating a very green apple. At his appearance Pancho launched into a fresh tirade.

El Jefe listened carefully to Pancho's rantings, every now and then turning to glare at me piercingly while he methodically finished eating. Finally he placed the chewed apple core on the reception desk and said, 'Martín, is this true?'

'Yes!' I replied. 'I really can't pay – how was I to know there's no ATM in Nazca?'

Pancho's voice had taken on a new and higher pitched whine, and just when I feared it would crack, El Jefe held up his hands in surrender. '*Basta, ya basta*,' he said firmly. 'This is not a problem. I can solve this.' And he told me his plan.

It was simple enough: I would travel to nearby Ica, the closest town with an ATM, and withdraw enough money to settle my debts. Meanwhile, Pancho and El Jefe would hold my belongings hostage in Nazca until I returned.

El Jefe smiled winningly. 'When you come back, you pay; when you pay, you get your stuff back. What do you say, *hermano*?' he asked.

In the absence of any choice, I agreed to El Jefe's terms. 'Excellent,' he concluded, obviously pleased with his skilful brokerage of the deal. 'Now hand over your passport.'

In a country where travelling without identification papers invites the attentions of a police force renowned for its, let us say, 'inquisitiveness,' this seemed like a very bad idea.

'No,' I said firmly. 'I'll leave everything else, but not my passport.'

El Jefe smiled broadly, as if proud of me for seeing through his con. 'Fine, fine, no worries *hermano*,' he said, and I realised he'd merely been trying his luck. Which made me wonder: how many times had he already been successful in that particular scam?

El Jefe personally escorted me to the central marketplace. 'Buses are cheaper,' he explained as we walked, 'but I know a guy who can get you to Ica faster than any *maldito colectivo*. You'll like him. Relax!'

El Jefe's contact turned out to be a singularly unsavoury fellow in his sixties sitting on the bonnet of a 1970s Chevrolet Caprice. This low-grade Charon looked like he was nursing a lifelong hangover and blamed the world for not having enough aspirin in it. Lank, greasy hair was slicked back over a scalp mottled with age, and a cigarette was never absent from his stained and trembling fingers. Most disgustingly, the man exhibited an unfortunate nervous habit of involuntarily smacking his lips every few seconds. I distrusted him on sight.

El Jefe did all the talking, haggling over a price which he stressed I would pay only upon arrival in Ica. The driver (whose name I never discovered) never once looked in my direction, but merely grunted in agreement.

The Chevrolet soon had a full complement of passengers, two highland men in the back seat with me and a young couple up front with the driver. El Jefe waved goodbye as the monstrous car pulled away from the marketplace. 'Don't forget I got your stuff!' he called out cheerily.

I settled in for the two-hour ride to Ica. With little traffic on the highway we sped across the Nazca plain.

Not long after leaving Nazca the driver slowed his huge vehicle and turned down a poorly surfaced road that led out across the

desert, away from the Panamericana. I looked around at the other passengers, but none seemed perturbed by the change of route. 'Is this the right way?' I couldn't help but ask.

The driver grunted over his shoulder. He knew a faster way to Ica. Fleetingly, the scenario flashed through my mind that this whole road trip was an elaborate set-up to mug me in some isolated desert locale – but then I remembered El Jefe had told the driver I had no money. No, I need only indulge such paranoid fantasies *after* reaching Ica.

We were headed straight for a rocky range that rose sheer above the plain. I'd never seen mountains like this before. Although these peaks were rank pretenders compared to the Andes, their rocks were so fantastically warped and melted that they looked like they'd been made from papier-mache. In fact, the scenery was uncannily reminiscent of an old Hollywood sound stage, like the set of *The Ten Commandments* when Charlton Heston climbs Mount Sinai to receive the stone tablets of the law. Except that in this Peruvian range there were no bushes, burning or otherwise, and barely any soil – just rock, to the preclusion of life. As the Chevrolet climbed higher into the range, a deeper silence settled over its occupants. The road was passably safe, if tortuously twisted, and so it wasn't fear so much as a feeling almost akin to reverence that kept us from talking – but reverence for what exactly, I couldn't be sure. Even the driver had momentarily stopped his compulsive lip smacking.

The spell was broken as the road passed through a narrow, rock-hewn tunnel and began the descent to the plains once more. The landscape on this other side of the nameless mountain range was dominated by massive sand dunes, some more than a hundred metres in height. It was my fantasy image of the Sahara, but transplanted to Peru.

Ica lies in a fertile river valley of the same name and, like Egypt and Mesopotamia, was once the seat of immeasurably ancient kingdoms. Our destination was Ica's *plaza de armas*, and as we entered the teeming square my senses were filled by a cavernous space ringed by enormous billboards and epileptically flashing neon signs: Coca Cola, Samsung, Ford and a horde of other craven multinationals proclaiming their suzerainty over this city and its populace. There was not a llama or bowler hat in sight – Ica was as far from the Peru of tourist brochures as imaginable. Not ancient astronauts, as the ufologists would have it, but rather this scene, this splintered urban chaos shored up by the unseen labour of millions, revealed the true face of external alien influence in the midst of this ancient culture: the sheer power of capital, global and unstoppable, condensed in the neon dreams of a consumerist paradise that floated on steel girders and concrete pylons high above the overflowing streets of this desert city.

The other passengers alighted in the plaza, dispersing to attend their separate errands and, for all intents and purposes, separate lives. A lone man clutching a large canvas bag, the kind you might see in the sorting room of a post office, clambered on board at the drop-off point. The driver allowed himself a terse nod in greeting.

The Chevrolet's too-powerful engine roared back into life as the driver swung the vehicle back into the maelstrom. '*Cajero automatico*,' he said in a low growl, pointing a peremptory finger at a steel and glass building on the next corner. *We could have walked*, I thought to myself, but what's the point of having a car that big if nobody notices it?

On my return to the still-running Chevrolet I handed over a bill for a hundred *soles* to the driver. He looked at the crumpled

note as if I'd just passed him a soiled nappy. 'It's thirty-eight *soles*,' he muttered murderously. I stared balefully back at him.

'The bank doesn't give out notes less than a hundred,' I said as evenly as I could manage.

The horrid man glared at me in sudden fury. 'How am *I* supposed to get change from this, you bastard *hijo de puta!*' he shouted. And with this the driver launched into a perfect torrent of vitriol, railing against me as if I were the cause of all his sufferings, the cruel and fickle glitch in his life that held him back from achieving true happiness.

As I sat in the leather interior of the Chevrolet listening to the driver's promises to dump me in the desert and perform other unmentionable acts to my person, something snapped inside of me. Eye to eye with my antagonist, I did something I had until then refrained from doing in South America: I let loose at the man in English.

'No, you bloody well listen to me!' I shouted back in very real anger. The driver, who was just starting to enjoy his tirade, paused for a moment in confusion. 'I've had a *shitty* day, and you are just making it that much less bearable. Do you really think I wanted to see Ica for no reason other than to be *harassed* by you and your cigarette smoke and your bloody annoying lip-smacking? I could be in Lima by now, but I'm stuck with you, amigo, and if *you* don't have change for thirty-eight *soles* then that's hardly my fault!'

Honestly, there's no better way to act like an arrogant tourist than to give a tongue-lashing to the locals in a language they cannot understand. And yet, unfair as it was, the tactic seemed to have worked; when I re-explained my situation more calmly in Spanish, the driver nodded glumly and suggested we go in search of somewhere to break my note. 'That would be fine,' I conceded.

My first impression had been correct – the canvas bag carried by the man who met us in the *plaza de armas* was stuffed full of

envelopes, bubble-wrapped objects and other small items of mail. For the next hour we toured Ica's suburbs, making delivery stops to houses, plumbers, butchers, apartment blocks and bakers. It was at this last establishment that I bought lunch and was finally able to break my century note. I handed over the thirty-eight *soles* I owed, and the man relaxed visibly as he stowed the coins and notes in the Chevrolet's voluminous glove box. To be fair, from his perspective it must've seemed all too likely that I would try jumping ship in Ica before paying up. And of course it was entirely possible that he'd taken my fare under duress, that El Jefe had called in a favour (or made an offer the driver couldn't refuse) when negotiating my passage to Ica.

'I'm going back to Nazca tonight, *joven*,' the driver informed me as we pulled away from the bakery. 'I can take you back for another thirty-eight *soles*.'

Despite the détente in our relations, I had no wish to spend more time with the easily enraged driver. And that lip-smacking nervous habit was really getting to me. 'Could you just drop me off at the *terminal de autobuses*?' I asked.

Less than thirty minutes later I was in the relatively spacious cabin of a trim little *colectívo*, speeding back along the Panamericana to deliver me safe and sound to my creditors in Nazca. With some relief I reflected that I'd soon be leaving that town for good. Nearly seven months had passed since I left Melbourne, and I was tiring of being on the road for so long. But my work here wasn't done yet either, for last on my list of ufological hotspots was the plateau of Marcahuasi, a trip that would necessitate leaving behind the oppressive but at least fully oxygenated coast and returning once more to the rarefied atmosphere of the highlands.

First I had to pay Pancho and El Jefe. I just hoped they hadn't sold off my underwear while I'd been gone.

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10

MARCAHUASI:
MOUNTAINS OF THE GODS

Lima was once called *la Ciudad de los Reyes*, the City of the Kings. I believe at one time it was a very beautiful city. The Plaza Mayor, with its cathedral and palaces of government, is one of the finest colonial urban complexes in the continent, and beachside Miraflores is a bit like Rio, only with more fog.

But as so many people tell you – offended package tourists en route to Machu Picchu, apoplectic town planners, cursing taxi drivers and practically every over-stressed citizen of the city I met – Lima has been choked by massive and uncontrolled population growth for the better part of a century. Though not as large as Mexico City or car-dependent as LA, its streets are fused solid in permanent gridlock – *colectivos* duel with each other on the congested boulevards to secure passengers, and no destination is ever less than a two-hour brush with death away. Riding through one of the *pueblos jovenes*, the ever-expanding shantytowns of the city's sprawling edges, I saw a circus bigtop rising above the chaotic knots of makeshift dwellings and yellow desert sands. *Pagliacci and his clowns have come to town*, I thought to myself, *but will anyone even notice?*

And yet I can't say I disliked the city, for it had spirit. Most *limeños*, as the locals call themselves, struck me as self-deprecating types, and the food – which reflected all the culinary regions of the country due to the constant flow of internal immigration from the provinces – was unfailingly good. Big, vibrant cities have always drawn me into their welter of possibilities, and so it was with some reluctance that I made preparations to leave for the plateau of Marcahuasi, which lay a long day's travel east of Lima, high in the Andes.

My old friend George Hunt Williamson visited Marcahuasi in the 1950s, describing his epic journey in *Road in the Sky*. 'On June 7, 1957, we made our way on foot and on horseback over tortuous Andean trails to San Pedro de Casta and from there up to the plateau itself,' Williamson wrote.

> The native people of the village far below, descendants of the Huanca Indians, fear the plateau because they say it is an ancient place of 'magicians,' 'wizards,' or 'Giant Gods'. Their ancestors, the Huancas, held their sacred rituals of 'Huari' at Marcahuasi. The word *huari* in the Quechua language means: giant or strong. Formerly the 'Huarinas' (virgins in the worship of the god Huari) danced at the monolithic altars of Marcahuasi, casting their shadows upon stone figures carved in the days when the Earth was young . . . Why the festivals are no longer held at Marcahuasi is not known, unless it is because of the fear of the place in general.

Reading this passage, I felt certain that old George Hunt must've been a fan of pulp horror writer H.P. Lovecraft. On the other hand, extraterrestrial gods from beyond time and space who favoured dancing virgins for their propitiary rites couldn't be *all* bad.

Horses have been replaced by *colectivos* in these parts of the Andes, a mixed blessing, as I discovered, for these nimble little minibuses are invariably piloted by insane young men with more faith in the guiding hand of the Virgin than road signs. Our driver, who possessed the high cheekbones of the indigenous Peruvians but sported a halo of thick, woolly hair that suggested an African heritage, played the bus's horn (worryingly, the theme from *The Twilight Zone*) for every farmer we passed by the roadside.

Gradually, the *colectivo* filled with a silent brigade of highlanders, the men in spotless white shirts and broad brimmed hats and the women in multilayered skirts and bowlers. One particularly resplendent *campesino* clad in a brocaded waistcoat, black alpaca-wool matador trousers and rakishly tilted hat, hauled on board a bound and trussed kid (a young goat, not his child). Hourglass eyes wide with panic, the terrified animal pissed itself with a strangled bleat as soon as the bus began moving, filling the cramped cabin with the acrid stench of ammonia.

The other passengers affected not to notice, except for one unusually forward woman. Daring her hatchet-faced husband's glare of stony disapproval, she caught the attention of the Andean dandy who had now tied the kid's legs together to prevent it leaping about the bus.

'That's a good-looking animal you've got there, *caballero*,' she said, flashing a coy smile. The dandy beamed with pride.

'It is true, *señora*,' he agreed. 'I will take her to market, where she will be slaughtered.' The woman leaned back in her chair, nodding with admiration. '*Muy bien, muy bien*,' she said. Her husband stared murderously out the bus window at some distant point in the valley.

The seat next to me was taken by a clean-cut man in a shabby suit and an alarmingly purple tie. He introduced himself as a *curandero*, or traditional medicine practitioner (some might say

witchdoctor), from Trujillo, on Peru's north coast. He handed me his calling card and invited me to visit next time I was in Trujillo.

I thanked the earnest-looking shaman, but explained that I didn't plan to travel that far north. 'No, no, no,' insisted the curandero. '*You will come see me in Trujillo, one day.*' I had the uncomfortable feeling that I'd just had a spell (or perhaps a curse) cast over me, but if so it's a slow burning fuse, for years have passed since meeting the curandero on the bus to Marcahuasi and I haven't yet set foot in Trujillo.

A few hours passed, and the walls of the valley we were tracing became steadily steeper and higher. Eventually the road approached a low concrete bridge that spanned the rocky Rimac River. From my bundle of maps I knew Marcahuasi lay on this side of the valley, but the bus veered to the left, crossing the bridge to begin climbing a narrow, poorly graded track.

'*Bajame!*' I called out to the driver. He slowed the bus but did not halt it, glancing over his shoulder with raised eyebrow.

'You want to get off *here*?' he asked. 'Nothing here, *hermano*.'

'I thought this bus was going to Marcahuasi,' I replied. 'Isn't that on the other side of the river?'

The driver smiled, revealing a massively golden tooth embedded in his upper jaw. '*Ya, joven*, we *are* going to Marcahuasi! Second! First we go up this side of the valley.' He'd already stamped on the accelerator, and the bus surged up the slope. 'You could wait here for me to return in an hour, maybe two,' he explained rhetorically. 'Or just ride with us until we come back down. Ride with us, *joven*!'

I soon wished I'd accepted the driver's first offer. In my journeys through South America I'd travelled along some fairly sketchy roads, including the UNESCO-recognised 'World's Most Dangerous Road,' the muddy single lane highway built by Paraguayan POWs in the 1930s that links La Paz to the

Amazonian lowlands. But the track that we now climbed was the most gut-wrenchingly, scream-stiflingly hazardous route I'd ever laid eyes on outside of *The Wages of Fear*.

On one side loomed the precipice; on the other, the grassy slope rising a mile above the riverbed. The tyres squealed to find purchase on a surface of loose gravel that floated like pond scum over great ragged boulders designed to tear the differential out of poorly maintained, overburdened vehicles. Like ours. The driver wrestled with the steering wheel like a modern-day Gilgamesh, with an afro.

The other passengers noticed my expression of deep mammalian fear. 'Don't worry, *gríinguito*,' said the farmer with the pissing goat, 'this valley is called *el valle de nunca vuelve* – the valley of no return.' And he broke into delighted laughter, joined uproariously by the woman in the bowler hat who had so admired his goat earlier. 'Only joking, *gríinguito*, only joking,' he amended, wiping a tear from his cheek.

Finally, mercifully, the *colectívo* crested the lip of the valley and we descended into a tiny settlement known as Chaclla, or so the driver informed us. Two ancient horses stood rheumy-eyed and apathetic in the middle of Chaclla's single street, so immobile and desiccated that I wondered if the poor beasts hadn't died on their feet and been left there by nostalgic villagers. 'No, *señor*, look – we are a *two-horse* town.'

Two *campesínos* got off at Chaclla with their sacks of potatoes. No-one got on. For *two sacks of potatoes* we risked our lives, I thought deliriously. The bus began the return journey down the valley immediately. Rather than think about how high up we were (and hence how far we had to fall), I looked out across the great gulf of air to Marcahuasi itself. From this vantage point the plateau stood out clear against a jumbled backdrop of higher, craggier

peaks; it appeared as if an entire mountaintop had been sheared off and capped with an armoured layer of dark granite.

San Pedro de Casta – an Escher-esque cluster of red-roofed houses clinging to a two-thousand-metre-high shelf in the vertiginous Rimac Valley. Never had I felt more relief arriving in a place unknown to me. San Pedro was a Quechua-speaking town that had once belonged to the Inca Empire, the great *Tawantínsuyu*, or Land of Four Corners. Even today the High Andes retain a distinct cultural and linguistic identity that transcends the borders of the modern nations of Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia, Chile and Argentina. The village was dominated by a rocky outcrop that towered over the low rooftops, its peak crowned by an iron cross. This was another *calvario* such as I'd seen in Copacabana, a Christian shrine erected over a pagan place of worship. In pre-Hispanic times mountains were held sacred by the Andean peoples, and the highest point in any settlement exerted a mystic significance over the community's religious life.

I set off by myself at dawn the next day. The plateau rose a further eight hundred metres above the village, and at these altitudes such an ascent made for hard going. Altitude sickness is known as *soroche* in the Andes, named for the archaic Spanish word for 'ore' as it was once believed that toxic emanations from metals buried high in the mountains were the cause of the sickness. The symptoms of soroche are clear to anyone who has had the misfortune to experience them: shortness of breath, nausea, dizziness, the kind of migraine found in nature only among grizzly bears coming out of hibernation, and, in extreme cases, death.

(Except for that final symptom, I'd experienced the full force of soroche a few weeks earlier in La Paz, the highest capital city in the world at 3,600 metres above sea level. Unable to sleep, I wandered into a nightclub somewhere off the city's main street

and ordered the traditional Bolivian remedy for altitude sickness: *té de coca*, a warming infusion of dried coca leaves seeped in a pot of freshly boiled water. Cocaine is the chemically refined product of coca – but in its raw, chlorophyll-loaded form, coca leaves are no more intoxicating than a mild cup of coffee. As the bitter draught worked its magic I became aware of the strangeness of my surroundings. I was in a *Bolivian jazz club*. Around me sat the ruling classes of Bolivian society, heavy-set moustachioed men puffing on absurdly large cigars, their glamorous wives sipping demurely from champagne flutes. A subdued three-piece toiled through the Dixieland classics, red bowties gleaming in the candlelight, young men straight off the Altiplano who were probably playing panpipes in a village fiesta the week before. I looked more closely at my *té de coca* in case the bartender had surreptitiously slipped me something more powerful.)

It was not the full-blown *soroche* I felt climbing Marcahuasi, but in the steepest parts of the trail – which couldn't have been more than two kilometres in length, even though it felt like two hundred – I found it necessary to stop and rest every few metres. The breath tore raggedly in my chest; a starburst of pain blossomed behind my eyes.

The slow progress did allow me, however, to take note of my surroundings. A forest of wildly branching cactus trees fully two metres in height flourished on these upper slopes. In the coolness of dawn this strange wood was teeming with bird life. Flocks of pigeons foraging among the dry leaf litter startled at my approach and broke cover as a group, their wings making a *thwap thwap* noise as they fled. Dozens of hummingbirds, many times larger than the tiny feathered jewels of the jungle lowlands, flitted among the clouds of spines to reach the sweet nectar of the cactus flowers. And there were magnificent crested woodpeckers too, the first I'd seen since the austral forests of Patagonia.

In contrast, the plateau itself appeared utterly devoid of life. The wind made strange and startling noises in the silence – I watched leaves orbiting in the vortices of tiny whirlwinds barely a foot in diameter, sweeping through the stone corridors and gullies to sound like freight trains approaching.

Marcahuasi, which means 'house of spirits' in Quechua, stretched before me, a four thousand metre high wasteland of massively tumbled boulders and sparse, cacti-studded scrub. Something I hadn't realised from reading George Hunt's ramblings in *Road in the Sky* was the presence of ruins on the plateau. On the open ledge directly behind the approach from San Pedro a dozen or more *chullpas* dotted the plain, smaller and cruder than the towers of Sillustani but nonetheless well preserved and sombre in their high isolation. They marked the landscape not as wilderness, not empty, but *vacated*, left behind.

And now I came face to face with the stone sculptures of Marcahuasi, in all their evocative and fabulous shapes. The map I'd picked up in San Pedro listed over seventy named formations, the damn things crowding the plateau like so many superheroes turned to stone by some evil super-villain. Over to my right was *El Astronauta*, a rocky protuberance that, in certain conditions, looked like Neil Armstrong; and here was *La Esfinge*, the Sphinx, waiting for the lone traveller to walk between her outstretched paws. Other more obscure sculptures included *El Casco Germano*, the Germanic Helmet; *El Alquemista*, the Alchemist; and *El Cancaucho*, supposedly a ceremonial altar whose proportions suggest use by beings twelve feet tall. Disappointingly, there was no *El Ufologista*.

I confronted the great outcropping called Peca Gasha, also known as *El Monumento a la Humanidad*. It is said that the features of every human race are visible in the countenance of this Andean Memnon's Head – fourteen faces in daylight, and a further two only by the light of the moon. (Hmm. I'm sure there's more than

sixteen types of human faces, but perhaps we all look the same to the space brothers.) The resemblance the Peca Gasha shares with a carven head *is* uncanny, but Marcahuasi revealed in the harsh sunlight gave up no secrets, just the grey inertia of stone rising up beneath darkest blue.

Time passed slowly on the plateau. I remembered to drink some water and, suitably rehydrated, time resumed its normal speed once again. A little while later as I sat near a lookout overhanging the Rimac Valley and the tiny terracotta rooftops of San Pedro, I realised I was no longer alone. A sizeable party of villagers was slowly winding up the path to the plateau, their backs laden with the tools of heavy labour: shovels and picks and crowbars. Most climbed on foot but some rode on the backs of mules, their tan-coloured mounts' long ears flicking about to keep the persistent Andean flies out of their eyes. Maybe it was the clear, dry air, or perhaps an effect of the heightened sensations I felt while on the plateau, but even from this distance I could make out the individual braid of the women's woollen shawls, and each speck of dust on the men's black felt hats. No sound, not even the crunching of pebbles underfoot, reached me yet.

And then I did a strange thing. Instead of waiting at the head of the path where I might hail or be hailed by the villagers, I retreated up the track to where it plunged through a stony gulch. Through this final pass the silent villagers would have to shuffle in single file before coming out onto the plateau and its otherworldly garden. Not knowing why I was doing this, I positioned myself on a broad rock jutting over the gulch and waited.

The first *campesino* appeared. As I watched, the procession slowed to pass through the tight defile. I held my breath, and not one villager looked up to see me, although each passed no more than six feet from where I sat in the bright sunshine.

I became suspended in the mountain air, remote and yet utterly present within the locus of my invisible vantage point. I was reminded of tales of faerie processions said to be visible to mortals only on certain days of the year, when the faerie king and queen and their courtiers pass by a preordained path, oblivious to the presence of onlookers. Woe betide the curious mortal who attempts to follow those gaudy creatures, a lifetime in thrall to faerie glamour their only reward . . . Such were the thoughts that flashed through my mind that amber morning nearly three miles above the level of the sea. Looking back now, I'm strongly inclined to dismiss my passing fancy for the romantic bullshit that it was – there's every chance that the party of villagers, not used to sharing their world with outsiders, were aware of my presence and simply chose not to acknowledge it.

Through the gulch they passed. At the narrowest point the path disappeared altogether to become a cleft in the granite over which hobnailed boots and iron horseshoes slipped and skittered. Riders dismounted and led nervous mules over the uncertain ground. Every able-bodied inhabitant of San Pedro de Casta was marching as one into the heart of the sacred plateau.

Two stragglers brought up the rear, a youth astride a docile mule and an older man in a broad brimmed hat, perhaps the boy's grandfather, who led the beast by the reins. The pair halted in a rocky alcove before entering the narrowest point. The old man and the youth spoke to each other with a warmth and familiarity I'd rarely seen among the outwardly dour peoples of the High Andes. Suddenly I felt the voyeur's guilt of seeing people stripped of their public mask. I shifted uneasily on the cold rocks, before abruptly standing up.

'*Buenos días*,' I called. The boy and his grandfather started. Clearly they hadn't been aware of their eavesdropper. The mule remained an impassive player in the new and suddenly tense

tableau into which it had been led, eyes lidded to slits in the glare of the high, tropical sun.

'I'm sorry, *señores*, I didn't mean to surprise you,' I offered in what I hoped were non-threatening tones. '*No, joven, todo bien*,' replied the old man. The boy said nothing.

I introduced myself with the formality I'd become accustomed to in South America. The boy and his grandfather nodded gravely but said nothing in return. No questions, no confusion at this alien traveller's presence on the plateau. They stood before me, eyes not quite meeting mine but nevertheless burning with some emotion I couldn't bring myself to believe was resentment. Trespasser. Outsider. Not *why are you here?* but, *leave here now.*

And yet . . . nor was I being driven away. The truth was, I could not read this boy and his grandfather's expressions, not in the way I sensed old Walter Haut was hiding something from me in Roswell, or in the way Jorge and his family welcomed me so openly to their mountain refuge in Cochiguaz. Of all the peoples I've met, those of the Andes are the ones I feel most separated from. This is not judgement that I pass. Rather, it's that we – the boy and his grandfather from San Pedro and the wandering ufology-ologist from Melbourne – did not inhabit the same symbolic space; the world was not the same world for us, even as we stood together on the same rocky earth. The alienation I felt in this encounter was distressing and yet, incredibly, inexpressibly thrilling.

No, not quite true. We had some words in common. I knew those Spanish night classes I took weren't just a vanity project.

'What is happening here today?' I asked as politely as I could. The old man answered.

'We are making repairs to *La Fortaleza*,' he said. The name meant 'the Fortress' in Spanish, and I thought of the great walls and embankments of the Inca strongholds at Ollantaytambo and

Sacsayhuaman. The Inca engineers famously used no mortar in their massive constructions – nor heavy beasts of burden, or the wheel for that matter. Instead, each multi-tonne stone was dressed individually to fit seamlessly into the master oeuvre of the structure. In the ruined palace of Pachacutec – the greatest Inca of them all, whose name means 'Maker of the World' and for military genius is comparable only to Alexander the Great or Napoleon – I saw a stone set in a wall with no less than *fourteen* corners.

Perhaps my curiosity showed on my face for, without altering his mask of haughty distance, the grandfather asked if I would care to accompany the work party.

'Really?' I asked with hope returning.

'Yes, yes,' the old man said, a slippery edge of irritation betrayed in the twist of his shoulders. 'This way, we must go this way,' and he grasped the mule's reins firmly again, turning back down the path. The boy looked over his shoulder boldly and said his first words to me.

'Why aren't you wearing a hat?' he asked.

It was true – I had coated myself in the oily sunscreen I bought in Lima, but hadn't thought to pack a hat for the hike to the plateau. 'I forgot it,' I replied lamely, and the boy, clearly at a loss to understand this oversight, turned away once again.

In the rarefied air the old man and the mule slowly outdistanced me so that we were no longer walking together when the path emptied into a grand natural clearing hemmed in on all sides by the great stones of the plateau. The villagers sat gathered in a semicircle on the rich grass that covered the floor of the clearing, the greenest vegetation I would see on Marcahuasi. Above them reared the rocky pinnacle of the Fortaleza, not so much an artificial keep as a granite tor capped by a low, drystone

structure – an ancient Peruvian lord's tomb, as I subsequently discovered.

An assembly was in progress. Speakers, mainly older men but a few women too, rose to their feet to be heard in turn by the gathered townsfolk. No applause was given, no questions ventured. The exchange took place entirely in Quechua, so whatever the proposals, debates, prayers or condemnations uttered were lost to me.

No one registered my anomalous presence. I might've been one of Marcahuasi's stone figures and played a larger role in the meeting.

Presently, the last speaker finished and the villagers dispersed with their tools to begin the business of restoring the Fortaleza. One group began excavating a trench in the rocky soil around the base of the tor. A second fanned out across the clearing in search of large, flat rocks, which were then piled neatly near the trench, while a third group climbed up to the ruined structure on the peak of the Fortaleza, from whence I soon heard metal clanging on stone. Restoration, reconstruction or vandalism, I couldn't say; but unless a crack UNESCO team parachuted in at that moment to halt the changes being wrought upon this ancient site, it was these villagers' ancestral right and inalienable province to treat their cultural patrimony as they saw fit.

One of the men I thought of as the 'overseers' waved me over, holding out a pickaxe for me to take. This particular San Pedro man stood out from his fellow villagers by the large, black cowboy hat he wore, in contrast to the broad brimmed Iberian-style hats worn by the other men. '*Gringuito*,' he said, not unkindly, 'why aren't you wearing a hat?' I grabbed the proffered tool and attempted a lopsided smile. 'I want a tan,' I replied, at which the cowboy revealed a truly fine set of bright, white teeth. He held his brown, rusty-coloured hand up to my pale forearm,

shaking his head. 'Let's work, *joven*,' he said, and assigned me to the trench-digging brigade.

After a while I was allowed a break, and I climbed to the top of the Fortaleza for the stupendous views it gave over the surrounding mountains and valleys. Upon returning to the trench (we were digging the foundations for a stone fence, I now saw), I decided to drop UFOs into the muted conversation.

The response was immediate and passionate. 'No, no, *no!*' One of the younger women shouted at me, her bowler hat wobbling dangerously as she wagged a calloused finger under my nose. 'There's nothing up here but stones and ruins!' She glared fiercely into my face, eyes burning with indignation. I kept digging, meekly.

But the work party was not wholly behind the angry young woman. A low murmur of dissension broke out as men, women and teenagers put up their hoes and picks and shovels to debate my question. Incensed by her fellow villagers' lack of solidarity, the woman leapt with great agitation from person to person, haranguing each loudly in a furious torrent of Quechua and Spanish. Exasperated, she retired to sulk alone atop a low outcrop of rocks, glaring out over the mountains beyond the plateau.

One of the villagers who had opposed the angry young woman most vocally was a severe-looking matriarch in a dusty bowler and voluminous blue skirts. She might have been the oldest person in the work party. Her skin was stretched tight and dry over high cheekbones, her knuckles gnarled from decades of manual labour in the desiccating Andean climate. I felt compelled to give this woman my full attention.

'Why do you want to know about the UFOs?' she asked in rasping voice, hard and devoid of expression. I explained my interest and purpose.

The old woman nodded solemnly. 'Yes, there *are* UFOs on Marcahuasi. We all know that,' and she gestured with one of her bony claws to take in the work party, the ruins, the plateau itself. Other villagers now voiced their assent, calling out, '*Sí, sí, hay OVNIs*' and '*los extraterrestres son reales*.'

'What do the OVNIs that come to Marcahuasi look like?' I asked the group.

Bright, round lights in the sky was the consensus answer. 'They come for the rocks,' added another woman. I'd suddenly found myself in the middle of the most engaging conversation I'd had with Andeans so far, and it was about flying saucers.

'The OVNIs have come here for a long, long time,' added the matriarch.

'Did the OVNIs make the stone sculptures of Marcahuasi?' I asked.

The woman shook her head firmly. 'No, the stones are of the Earth,' she said. 'Pachamama? You know Pachamama?'

Pachamama was the pre-Hispanic Earth goddess worshipped in the Andes from Ecuador to Argentina. In many places she remains the reigning deity. In the infernal silver mines of Potosí in southern Bolivia, miners still sacrifice llamas to appease Pachamama, burying the animals' bones at the entrance of mineshafts to protect those toiling within.

'Yes, I've heard of Pachamama,' I told the old woman. 'Are the OVNIs connected to the Earth goddess?' My question was met with a certain amount of confusion among the work party; some nodded, others invoked the Virgin, while the old woman who'd introduced this element of paganism remained unreadable. '*Tal vez, tal vez*,' was all she'd say. *Perhaps.*

'There are other places the OVNIs pass over,' the old women continued.

'*Muchos lugares?*' I asked.

'*Sí, sí, muchos lugares*,' she nodded. *Many places*. 'In Huaraz, that is another place. And Lago de Titicaca, also.'

'What about Nazca?' I suggested. 'What about the Nazca Lines?'

'*No creo*,' replied the woman. She didn't think so. Her answer was so expressionless that I felt unsure whether the name 'Nazca' was familiar to her or not.

'But then why *these* places?' I now asked. 'What makes them special to the OVNIs?'

'The places I tell you of are one with the OVNIs,' the woman intoned. She paused a long moment, making me fear the audience was at an end. But no, there was one more bare bone of this secret geography of the Andes to pass on. 'The earth has always been here,' she continued. 'The stones reach up from the earth, and they have power. The OVNIs know this, and they come for the stones.' I wouldn't get a more detailed answer than this.

The other members of the work party were becoming restless. A few had picked up their tools and were digging in the dry soil once more. 'I am grateful for your information, *señora*' I relayed to the old woman, who tipped her bowler in acknowledgement. 'I've been on Marcahuasi since dawn – will I see an OVNI today?' I asked.

'No. Only at night-time,' the old woman said, her expression rigid.

'Night-time,' I echoed, cursing I hadn't packed my tent. 'But I have to return to San Pedro tonight.'

The old matriarch permitted herself the tiniest lifting of her lips. A smile; no, a smirk. 'In that case, *señor*,' she replied, 'you won't see anything, will you?' And with that impeccable display of logic she got up and walked away.

This effectively marked the end of my questions about UFOs – or at least an end to answers the villagers were willing

to give. I toiled with them in their labours for an hour more, despite their return to ignoring my presence. Eventually they moved away from me as well. Realising that it was probably time I departed, I laid down my pick and nodded briefly in the black-hatted cowboy's direction. He didn't exactly avoid my eye, but neither did he acknowledge my leave-taking. And so I walked away like a ghost, the villagers silent except for the sound of earth being torn up and stones overturned.

This encounter seemed like a failure at the time. These Andean villagers had no real UFO stories, and I was afforded precious little insight into how they made sense of Marcahuasi and its ambiguous connection to high strangeness. But research doesn't always follow a straight and narrow path, and ufology never does. It would not be until I travelled to Mexico that I began to piece together the riddle of the stones and the highly strange gravity that our Earth can exert upon UFOs, and not the other way around, as ufology will tell you.

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11

MELBOURNE:
SUBMISSION

Not long after my ascent of Marcahuasi I boarded a plane at Lima International Airport and was mildly surprised to discover that its nosecone pointed west, across the Pacific. This was no error in planning on my part; my surprise came only from the observation that I was finally ready to return home.

I'd been in South America for more than seven months. My once new backpack had acquired a mottled rusty colouration from the ochre dusts of Bolivia; years later I still can't get the damn thing completely clean, the black nylon weave has simply *changed* on the molecular level and will never be the same again. More worryingly, throughout the months of travel I'd wilfully neglected to respond to the initially upbeat, then formal, and finally resigned emails from the university, attempting to gauge my progress. No matter – we Plowmans have always tilled our own fields (and sometimes dug our own graves, too).

My parents met me at Melbourne Airport on a chill August morning. It was beautiful to see them again. Speeding homewards on the early morning emptiness of the inbound freeway, I sat for a moment quietly watching the dry volcanic plains, the paddocks of coarse brown grass and sugar gum windbreaks shading into

the industrial suburbs of the city's outskirts. I thought to myself, *this is where I'm from*.

Before departing Melbourne I had been living in a large warehouse with a revolving cast of flatmates on the corner of Victoria and Peel streets overlooking the great expanse of the Queen Victoria Markets. Some claim it is the largest covered markets in the Southern Hemisphere (but those people are in the pay of the City of Melbourne council chambers, that notorious front for Freemasonry, and besides, they've almost certainly never been to El Alto on the edge of La Paz, whose marketplace has its own GDP). We had just reached the top of the narrow staircase that led to the warehouse's living quarters when the door at the far end of the landing groaned on its hinges and Dave squeezed his ample physicist's shoulders through the opening. Beyond a disturbingly brief white towel wrapped around his waist, he was clad only in the beading droplets of water from the shower he had just finished. He froze in surprise.

Dave's eyes met ours. A lesser man may have reacted in embarrassment, fumbling with the towel to hide his shame but in the process revealing that which the vicar's wife thought she would never see again outside of wedlock (the moment did have a feeling of one of those naughty BBC comedies of the 1970s). Not Dave, though. Without a moment's pause he ambled over to where we stood in varied states of shock as nonchalant as if he'd invited us in for a cup of tea.

'Plowboy,' he said in his mellow boom of a voice, 'good to have you back.' And I was suddenly engulfed in a great damp embrace.

Dave now turned to my parents, who both knew him well and in their own, sometimes challenged way (as they were at this moment) adored him as the firm friend of their son. 'Mrs Plowman,' Dave said graciously, 'a pleasure to see you again,' and proceeded to hug her too.

'Oh, hello David,' my mother managed to squeak. It would not do that my father missed out, and so he was also summarily hugged, an experience he later likened to the personal-space-invading protocols of greeting dignitaries from a foreign country.

'Well, I'm already late for my run in the laboratory, so I'd best be off.' And so saying Dave continued his amble back to his room, shutting the door gently behind him. If meeting my parents at the airport had heralded the joy of coming home, Dave's greeting in the warehouse was the unmistakable signal to breathe a sigh of relief and say to myself, *things are back to normal again*.

I'd been back in Melbourne for perhaps a year and a half, engrossed in my writing as my dissertation slowly edged closer towards completion, when another major event – a turning point in fact, to coin a phrase – took place in my life. Ironically, it was during this period of solitary and monastic labour that I met the woman with whom I would fall hopelessly in love, who would travel with me further into the world of high strangeness and, most miraculously of all, appeared not to be bothered by my nightly descent into the seventh hell of snoring (once described by a fellow traveller like 'Thor, God of Thunder, making love to a diesel tractor'). We met in a library, of course.

Melbourne University has many libraries. The largest are run like gulags of the information age, where hapless researchers endure arbitrary sentences for crimes never fully explained. Mine was seven years with good behaviour. Here librarians strut and preen about the aisles like the flinty-eyed enforcers of the implacable Dewey Decimal System, equipped with whips and lathis and cattle-prods and not averse to running heavily laden shelving carts over students' and academics' toes alike for the slightest transgression of the clamorous signs plastered over every

surface: *No Talking in the Library, You Are in a* Silent *Area, Talking Among Library Users Will Result in Immediate Expulsion, Strictly* No Free Thought *in the Library*. The convict stain never truly vanished in Australia, it just got transferred to microfiche.

Not all libraries serve the same master, thankfully. In the 1930s a prominent Melbourne physician named Sir Albert Bowden Black (the 'Sir' came much later; racily enough, Black was the illegitimate son of a serving maid and the Chief Justice of South Australia, a fact which makes me like him better than if he'd just been a bumbling do-gooder) donated a sizeable part of his personal fortune to the University for the purposes of 'establishing a Library where students may appreciate the Fruits of Literature in an atmosphere of Peace and Calm, removed from the Strictures of Study and Examination.' Or words to that effect, anyway. Famously the Bowden Black displays its own sign, a stern warning to those who would contravene the good Doctor's founding principle: *Do Not Study in the Library*.

I met Priscilla Jane in the Bowden Black Library, but she was no fellow student; she was, and still is, a hot librarian.

I can't recall exactly the first time I laid eyes on Priscilla Jane, but I do remember the first time I looked up from reading an impossibly turgid exposition on Lacan's Four Fundamental Circumlocutions and said to myself, 'That new librarian's quite cute.'

To be more precise: she was bending over to stack some books, and I found myself absentmindedly admiring her compact little posterior. The shame of it all! And not just from the perspective of the liberal, poststructuralist feminism-friendly inner-urban credo I was then cultivating like some delicate but demanding bonsai wolverine – I was caught google-eyed in the act. At the exact moment that I came to my senses and realised what I was doing – in the Australian vernacular, 'having a perv' – Priscilla Jane turned around, mid-stack, and looked straight at me

through her fetchingly prim wire-rimmed glasses. And smiled, miraculously, sweetly, humanly and without a hint of embarrassment (but perhaps just a faerie wing's dusting of coyness).

It was at that moment that I knew, beyond a pale moonlight's shadow of a doubt, that librarians have strange and eerie powers of perception and should be either won over with expensive gifts or shunned for the practitioners of the unnatural arts that they are. I willingly succumbed to the first option and, despite fleeing the library in confusion after that first electric moment of eye contact, some months later Priscilla Jane and I were the hottest item in libraries since Johannes Gutenberg met movable type.

Could Priscilla Jane have known who she was getting mixed up with that very first time I hovered breathlessly by the library checkout counter, waiting for a moment – no, *the* moment – to ask her out? Later, at the café, I remember flailing around for conversation pieces like a sailor clinging to driftwood in a sea of sunken first dates. It was probably after the ill-advised second espresso (an attempt to showcase my continental proclivities) that I believe I said, 'Stick with me kid, I'll take you places.' Why did I not die of shame on the spot?

'Which places?' was Priscilla Jane's response, and I believe she honestly wanted to know if I really meant what I was saying, that the 'places' I had in mind weren't just a neatly renovated two-bedroom Edwardian terrace in a formerly edgy but now crushingly good inner-city neighbourhood close to schools and transport and cafés but nowhere near the horrendously gauche shopping malls that dominated life in the outer suburbs (for such were the dreams and aspirations of our liberal-minded crypto-middle-class demographic at that particular time and place).

'Priscilla Jane, there's something first I have to tell you about my PhD,' I began. She looked at me expectantly, sipping her tea. I told her the secret of my other life as a ufology-ologist.

Priscilla Jane took a second sip of tea. Too soon after the first. She was stalling for time, a characteristic sleight of hand and crockery that I have since come to recognise in her well.

'Does this mean you believe in UFOs?' she asked softly.

'No, not at all!' I replied. 'I'm not a believer or a sceptic.' And then, searching for words that I hoped would make my calling sound exciting rather than just plain weird, 'I'm more a historian of the strange, an analyst of the improbable. The stories about UFOs are what I'm interested in, not the things themselves.'

Priscilla Jane raised the teacup to her lips a third time, but something stayed her hand. She replaced the cup in its saucer with a brittle little *chink.* A smile, small and gentle like a marmoset's favourite reading cushion, lifted the corners of her mouth as I awaited her response.

The golden rule for completing a PhD is: however long you think you need, it will take longer. If it doesn't, you're either the Next Evolutionary Stage of Man or you're just not doing it right, hombre.

Thus it was almost with surprise that, a year or two after Priscilla Jane and I began seeing each other, I found myself walking to Ken's office for what had every indication of being our last meeting. *It's done already*, I thought to myself as I began climbing the stairs in his building. And yet, as I walked back down those stairs after realising that I'd entered the wrong tower yet again (why could I never remember?), I was struck by a wave of exhaustion. It felt like a lifetime ago – someone else's, surely not mine – that Ken had first cautioned me against 'going native' among the ufologists. Soon it would be over. But not before this last meeting.

Seated equably on his plush swivel chair, Ken smiled warmly at me in greeting. A steaming plunger filled the small room with the heady aroma of the black bean. Like a viper that had slithered into the frame of a still life painting, Ken's vorpal blade of critical incision lay on his desk next to the coffee plunger, sheathed in a tooled leather scabbard made from the covers of ancient postmodernist grimoires. Either that or the hides of former students who'd failed to make the cut.

'Take a seat, Martin,' Ken said graciously, indicating a second chair. As I went to sit I was surprised to find a second sword placed unobtrusively on the chair. I looked askance at Ken.

'Sit, sit, let's talk about this final chapter,' he repeated. Gingerly transferring the muzzled weapon to my lap as if it were a growling toy dog, I accepted Ken's proffered cup of coffee. The brew was thick and smooth and rich, a blend that I suspected was made available only to certain academics who had consigned their souls to an unmentionable Faustian bargain somewhere in the early part of their careers.

I noted that printouts of my thesis lay in scattered piles across Ken's desk. My second surprise since entering the office and discovering the scabbarded sword resting on my seat: there were almost no red marks on the paper.

'Let's begin, Martin,' he said, and before I knew what was happening Ken was out of his seat, blade drawn and arcing through the air-conditioned air of the office in a blur of bright steel and critical fury. *How did he do that?* I found myself thinking, even as my heart lurched, my toes curled, and my coffee spilled across the floor. Later I tried to analyse Ken's opening move: somehow he'd been able to sip from his coffee mug, take pen to my draft, and unsheathe his vorpal blade all at the same time, a move that clearly required *three* hands in motion simultaneously. The Master shows his skills.

As the shining blade descended towards my unprotected cranium and the coffee sprayed in brown splashes across the plush carpet, I did an unusual thing. Grasping the sheathed sword that Ken had left on my seat and, raising it in a two-handed grip, I blocked Ken's attacking blow. Our eyes locked over the crossed blades, mine wide with astonishment, Ken's unmoved by this hitherto unseen display of defensive dexterity.

'I've read this final chapter on "ancient astronauts" and I have to say' – Ken disengaged his katana, leapt backwards to land on the edge of his desk, all without a single glance behind him – 'that I quite enjoyed it.' Switching his grip to hold the sword low and directly in front of him, he launched himself off the desk.

Without thinking I was out of my chair and stepping to one side, sweeping my weapon in a fan-like arc to catch Ken's sword and drive it down deeply into the thick pile of the carpet. I had hoped that this sweeping motion would fling the scabbard from my blade, but I saw now that a metal hook prevented this from happening. My thoughts were occupied by two contrasting states of shock and fear: how would I get my sword free, and did Ken just say *he liked my chapter?*

'Really?' I asked in undisguised amazement. 'You don't think it needs more work?' I leapt backwards out of range of Ken's vorpal blade, backwards and upwards so that I landed in the tight corner where the walls of the office met the ceiling. There I hung, with nowhere further to hide; but my legs bunched tightly beneath me as I prepared to fling myself at my teacher.

Ken paced the floor beneath me, gauging his distance and reach. 'No piece of work is ever completely finished,' he murmured. 'But ancient astronauts are a sensible place to finish your history of "UFO"-ology, Martin' – he still persisted in pronouncing all three letters of the root-acronym – 'for they demonstrate how UFO-ologists look back into history as a way of fantasising

about the future. A neat rhetorical flourish to bring the project full circle.' He took a step backwards, sweeping his blade up to a vertical guard position. 'I think you're ready to submit, Martin.'

At these words I was seized by an illogical blaze of anger. I wasn't ready to go, not yet!

I propelled myself straight at Ken. In the split second before I was sure to collide, he made a little hop to his right, flicked his vorpal blade from his left hand (his fighting hand) to his right, and with his now free hand reached out and grasped my upraised scabbard, wrenching it from my grip. I collapsed in a heap on the floor.

My supervisor – soon to be former supervisor – stood over me, talking calmly. 'Well done, Martin,' he said firmly, wearing an expression that I could've sworn was pedagogical pride. 'It's truly commendable that you persisted in your struggle for so long. You have achieved so much.' And, discarding his weapon, he formally handed me the still-sheathed sword I'd just used in my clumsy but no less spirited attack. I accepted the now curiously ornamental looking object, still in a daze of disbelief at the turn of events. My days as a student were drawing to a close.

Ken gestured towards the coffee table and we took our seats once more, resuming our conversation as if nothing had happened (which, I should perhaps clarify for my too literal-minded readers, it didn't, of course – Melbourne University hasn't condoned duelling of any kind since at least the 1980s).

Unable to contribute further to our conversation, I sat in quiet shock while Ken went over the final checklist of things to do before submitting the final copy of my thesis. I held my scabbarded sword in a grip that was part terror, part mounting exhilaration. Unthinkingly, I'd taken hold of the latch that had prevented me earlier from drawing the weapon free. It flicked open now with a soft metal *snap!*

Ken's eyes darted to the source of the noise. 'Please don't open that in here, Martin,' he said in a firm, cautioning tone. 'Wait until you've left this room.' I complied immediately.

As I was leaving his office Ken rose to his feet again and held out his hand. I looked at it in some confusion.

'Well done, Martin,' Ken said once more. I tried to say something of the gratitude I felt as we shook hands, but could only manage a limp, 'Thank you, Ken.'

A week later the final bound copy of the thesis, the title picked out in gold against black, was ready. It seemed disappointingly slim, I remember thinking as I handed it over to the smiling receptionist in the departmental office. But moments after stepping out into the bold sunshine of what I realised was the last day of summer, I felt something I hadn't felt for seven long years: I felt young again.

Jack Kerouac reputedly wrote *On the Road* in New York City over a five-month period, eight hours a day, day after day. George, a friend of mine and a fervent scholar of the Beats, once described to me the state of 'the Scroll,' the near-mythical manuscript that Kerouac made by taping sheets of paper together so that he could preserve the unity of his work in a single, continuous flow of writing.

'I saw his actual *sweat* on the Scroll,' George recounted with ghoulish relish, downing his fourth or perhaps fifth long black for the day. 'Kerouac's wife Joan had to hang up the typed sheets in their apartment to dry before they could be stuck to the Scroll! Of course, this is all pure, pure hagiography,' George was now chortling. 'O Blessed Saint Jack! Bless us with your Holy Water!' He waved the waiter over. 'Another long black, and this time make it *looong*!'

If this kind of literary myth-making sounds romantic, I feel honour-bound to disabuse you. Kerouac's Scroll reminds me of that other famous religious relic, the Shroud of Turin: both incite spiritual ecstasy among their followers, both supposedly contain traces of bodily fluids (blood and plasma on the Shroud, sweat on the Scroll), and both are more or less frauds – the Shroud has been radiocarbon dated to no earlier than the thirteenth century AD, while Kerouac's Scroll was based on years of diary entries rather than a single explosive creative outburst.

The final draft of my thesis was completed during one of the hottest Australian summers on record. Quite possibly I hadn't written a generation-defining piece of literature, I'll freely admit, but I wrote like a man possessed, as the seven or so years that lay behind me were compressed into a nosecone of exhaustion within which I crouched, tapping away at my keyboard like a caged chimpanzee about to be shot into orbit. Priscilla Jane and I were living at that time in a small flat in a northern inner barrio of Melbourne, and, although the solid brick walls did their heroic best to deflect the heat, without emirate-strength air conditioning the Antipodean sun burnt through the roof and walls as if they were made of toffee. Undaunted, I continued writing in my briefs, keeping a couple of rolls of extra-absorbent paper towel on hand – my 'Scroll' as I see it now – to mop up the torrents of perspiration.

Towards the end of this final, sweat-drenched period of writing I had a strange, disquieting dream. Not a nightmare exactly, but rather a single, shattering envelopment that floated up from my unconscious like a peat bog giving up an ancient body, bound and gagged and preserved in an attitude of mineralised limbo.

It is night-time and I am standing on a street corner in Melbourne, not far from the gates of the university. I feel alert and wide awake, despite the schizophrenic voice whispering that

my real body lies prone and supine in that other world on the far side of this troubled slumber, deep in the twitching throes of REM.

A crowd of people have gathered in the street, staring skyward, arms outstretched and fingers pointed high. The aspect of my dream-self that remains lucid and knowing – the psychopomp? The ghost of a flea? – warns me not to do it, not to look upwards. *Wake up now!* it commands in a brittle and hollowed-out shriek, a pitifully small spike in the omnibeam that is lost against the background noise of the unconscious in its full, roiling tempest of unbidden imagery and emancipated fears. I look up.

The night sky is dark and endless as I remember it from my waking life, but there are objects moving across it like aquatic fireflies skating across the surface of a pond. The glittering lights move far above the city, but not so high that I can't make out the dim silhouettes of great lumbering objects. Not ten, not twenty, but dozens of giant craft ply the night sky. The objects are utterly, unthinkably, Kelvin-degrees-zero silent.

Without warning, four great beams of light shoot out from one of the objects floating high above us, cutting the sky into luminous quadrants – the brightest, most concentrated searchlights we'll ever see, superluminous filaments stolen from the sun's core – but rather than sweeping the terrain below the beams play out across the sky, catching the fuselage of other craft in the silent armada.

One by one the objects switch on their searchlights. The sky is criss-crossed with intersecting beams like the bearings of an ancient nautical map. But then, at the peak of the dream's intensity, the first object cuts its lights and plummets to earth.

The crowd recoils in atavistic, simian fear – but we always knew this was going to happen. The final metres of the fall are traversed too slowly, as through air suddenly become opaque and gelatinous, and I am afforded a long look at the object. An

elongated fuselage, black-on-black like the night sky. Dark rotors sprout from its upper surfaces, less like a helicopter's blades than grappling arms, perhaps with prehensile capabilities, still turning. No windows, no markings, no sign of the powerful searchlights mar the lines of the object. It strikes the earth at the centre of the intersection, where the tram tracks cross each other.

Silently, the craft shatters into brittle shards of black porcelain. Clouds of pulverised asphalt rise into the night air as the wreckage transforms into a vicious mass of jagged shrapnel. It tears through the massed onlookers with a sound that I hope never to hear in my waking life.

Unidentified craft are falling all over the city – but though this is no alien invasion, no war of the worlds humans have feared for so long, the catastrophe will be just as complete. Nowhere above ground will be safe this night. It takes the imminent impact of the third craft, whose dark bulk is poised directly above me – no, *aimed* at me, somehow I know this fact – to force a response from my paralysed body. I see shelter in the entrance to a nearby stormwater drain; just six inches high, it's too small to squeeze through, and yet it is my last hope.

Splashing through puddles of blood and worse, I dash towards the drain. As the craft collides with the street with a reverberation like crumpling train carriages, I dive for the impossibly small opening.

No pain, but nevertheless my skin is sloughed off by abrasive concrete lips. A sickening sound as of a giant pupa cracking its shell and I'm through. But this being a dream, this is not a sewer, of course. I have fallen and continue falling into a vast airy space, the hollow interior of a gigantic sphere. I register no heat on my exposed veins and nerve endings, as should be expected beneath the earth's crust where magma flows in convection currents hundreds of kilometres long. But the geologists are wrong. I would

like to laugh, but what I see deep beneath me precludes the levity of such a response.

Ufologists are also wrong. The earth is not completely hollow, nor inhabited by the humanoid crews of flying saucers or evil armies of detrimental robots transmitting negative brainwaves to unsuspecting surface populations. This interior earth, my dreaming earth, *is occupied*, but by nothing so sentient and so inconsequential.

At the centre of this colossal space, perhaps hundreds or thousands of kilometres below, lies a pulsating black star. Not a black hole, or anything else found on an astronomer's Main Sequence, but a sun nonetheless. Smoky tendrils reach from the dark sphere's core, lines of strange attraction that hold and pull and envelop a myriad of airborne objects down to its inert, two-dimensional surface. Some of these satellites are discoid, others very likely humanoid in shape, but I remember none of the details now as I write this account. A tendril flicks across the gulf and embraces me about the waist; I feel no panic but accept the pull of its highly strange gravity. Down towards the blackness – which is not blackness, I now realise, merely a failing in my senses to register its true form and a lacuna in my waking speech to describe it – I begin to drift.

12

MEXICO CITY TO TEPOZTLÁN:
INTO THE SACRED VALLEY

'Martin. Martin, wake up!'

Night-time interior, the darkness of the room diffracted by moonlight splayed through rustling louvres. A late tram rumbles through the night en route to the depot, clearly audible a mile away; its flashing rows of steel wheels strike sparks in my slowly waking brain.

Priscilla Jane leans over me, blonde hair a silver curtain falls, her expression unreadable in the darkness. But the concern in her voice is unmistakable and cuts through my post-oneiromantic fugue like a razorblade across an eyeball.

'Martin, are you alright?'

A great flat sphere of utter darkness. 'I don't think UFOs are finished with me yet,' I mumble.

I sense Priscilla Jane's body stiffen with alarm. 'What? What does that mean?'

Too late, I realise I have made a telling fumble. 'I mean, what I meant to say was, I don't think I'm done with UFOs yet,' I stammer instead.

Slowly, Priscilla Jane lies down again beside me. We look up into the ceiling, a blank and unseeing intermediary in our

conversation. 'What does that mean?' she asks a second time. I must attempt an answer, lest this moment pivots and swings and throws us irretrievably out of joint.

'I know you hoped to have me back after the thesis was finished,' I begin, struggling to order my sleep-smudged thoughts. 'I'm glad it's over. Really. But it feels like there's something I missed in those places I travelled to, caught up in the high strangeness, maybe. I don't know.' I turn to face her. 'Does that make any sense?'

Priscilla Jane is still. 'Are you saying want to go away . . . ?' and her unsaid *from me* is deafening. But that's not it.

'No. No!' *Smoky tendrils unseen in the night air.* 'I love you, I don't want to leave you! Cilla, you've put up with so much already, but . . . it's just that . . . when I was in South America I thought I glimpsed something running through all the stories people told me, this idea that there was some kind of strange attraction that drew UFOs and certain rocks together. Or maybe even the Earth itself.' *Hollow, but not empty.* 'I think I need to go over there again.'

'How long have you been thinking about this?' she asks as if afraid to hear the answer.

'I honestly didn't know until waking up just now.'

Priscilla Jane pulls the bed sheet tight over her chin. 'You are *not* going alone,' she says with great conviction.

'No,' I begin to agree, but she's not finished speaking.

'Go if you need to, Martin, I won't stop you – but this time I'm coming with you.'

To this day I don't fully understand my reluctance to involve Priscilla Jane in my research, if I could honestly call it that anymore. Perhaps I wanted to protect her from getting too close to the echoless well of high strangeness, as I sometimes fear I myself had failed to do. But she was adamant. And besides, more than fear, more than the dark unknown, I wanted her to be with me.

And the night is suddenly a good place again for two people to be together alone in an unbound and unseeing universe that will never know the love we have for each other. The black sphere contracts and, however momentary the respite, is gone.

I begin to drift into slumber once more, but Priscilla Jane has one more question. She asks it now.

'Martin?'

'Yes?'

'Are you sure you can't just find all of this on Wikipedia?'

'You're joking now, right?'

She sighs. 'Worth a try.' And I'm asleep again.

Priscilla Jane and I began preparing to travel to Mexico just weeks after I completed my doctorate. Of all the Latin American nations, Mexico has always received more than its share of UFO sightings. The country was also a favourite among ancient astronaut theorists, many of whom consider the emergence of Mexico's dazzling pre-Columbian civilisations in complete isolation from the rest of the world to be proof of prehistoric extraterrestrial contact in the isthmus. I was intrigued to see how these two strands of ufology – one rooted in the local culture and the other tending towards a global, nay, *universal* explanation – might exist side by side.

In the tales of OVNIs I collected during my first journey to Latin America, the pattern of belief I became aware of in Cochiguaz grew clearer in Bolivia and Peru, a pattern that linked OVNIs to the idea that certain rocks or portions of the Earth cast a shadow beyond this world to gain a foothold in that other world of high strangeness. Did this belief exist elsewhere? I had to find out for myself.

Ricardo was from the north, hence he was tall. So goes the popular wisdom in Mexico: the further south you go in this sprawling thighbone of a country the shorter, stockier and more indigenous the people get. In the Yucatán, village people speak Spanish with a Mayan accent.

'My grandmother was a *norteamericana*, from across the border in *Tejas* where everything is big, or so they say.' Ricardo climbed into the front seat, folding his grasshopper legs beneath the steering wheel of the VW Beetle. Priscilla Jane and I took the bench seat in the rear.

We pulled into the stream of traffic. There was no fear, just movement and speed. I caught Ricardo's eye in the rear-view mirror. 'But even Texas isn't as big as Mexico City, surely,' I objected.

Ricardo laughed, putting the eager little vehicle into gear. 'No, nothing is as big as Mexico City, *chavo!* Where does it start and finish? *Míra*, right now we're in the Distrito Federal, like Washington DC, yeah? But even *el DF* is not big enough, because every day the City spreads further into the other states around it. Sometimes we just call the City "Mexico," like the Aztecs did. Are you confused? Yes. I tell you, *hermano*, Mexico City isn't the capital, it *ís* the country.'

For me, Mexico City is more than that even, a place where the barriers between land and water, above and below – even life and death – shift with the centuries-old settling of the now dry Lake Texcoco. The Aztecs, whose capital Tenochtitlán lies buried beneath the present city, left their homeland in the semi-mythical Aztlán to wander the wilderness looking for a sign from their god Tezcatlipoca. A cruel and fickle god, Tezcatlipoca was, and one with an absurdist sense of humour – he demanded the Aztecs build a great city on the spot where they would find an eagle perched on a cactus with a snake in its beak. When the Aztecs

finally saw this sign, the cactus was growing on a swampy islet in the middle of Lake Texcoco. I can imagine the Aztec priests wearily turning to the emperor and saying, 'Yep, that's it. That's the place. What? Look, what the god wants, the god gets, alright?'

As I write this I'm plundering material from my Mexico travel diary. Such as this, the first entry in the journal, written only hours after our plane had flown long and low over endless rooftops in search of the airport, runways dwarfed into insignificance by the surrounding city:

> *15 de Noviembre 2007*
> Rooftop of pension barely 100 m from Zócalo and Aztecs' Templo Mayor – we drank Sol & watched tropical clouds tower and topple over the horizon – the Metropolitan Cathedral looms like giant melted chocolate cake sculptured by intelligent insects from Outer Oort Cloud – on streets below organ grinders dressed in khaki start up – mechanical piping repeats ad nauseum – already they drive me mad! – now in the Zócalo hundreds of dancers arrive in garb of Aztec warriors feathers flags & cowrie shells – drums begin – dancers stamp and whirl – on sidelines shamans exorcise *maldito* spirits with incense bells & beads for ten pesos a go. Will find UFOs and h. strangeness here I know it already

I don't mean to make Mexico City seem impossibly exotic. Out in the barrios it's all unrestrained construction and whirling traffic, dead dogs on the pedestrian crossings and taquerias on every corner. In the 'good' neighbourhoods the middle classes hoard their precarious wealth, weighted down with gold and bangles and chains. In Tlatelolco four hundred massacred students slumber in unforgiving darkness beneath the paving stones, while on Chapultepec Hill the marble dreams of emperors and foreign invaders are now the domain of tourists and young lovers.

Having moved through this cosmopolis, having redefined my woefully inadequate concept of what it means to be *crowded*, it makes perfect sense that of the world's major cities UFOs would be seen *en masse* here. The smoking summit of nearby Popocatépetl attracts UFOs equally well, with sightings skyrocketing in the vicinity of the rumbling mountain at times of increased volcanic activity. What remains to be seen is whether the OVNIs are monitoring the eruptions or causing them; that the City still stands suggests that mass destruction wasn't on the aliens' minds.

Another Mexico City locale popular among UFO spotters is Benito Juárez International Airport, Latin America's largest and busiest. It was here that our driver Ricardo saw a UFO, some ten years previously. It made quite an impression on him.

'Yeah, it was the scariest thing I ever saw,' Ricardo said as he throttled the little VW into a swiftly closing gap between two overladen *camiones*.

'When I first came down to the DF from Monterrey a friend found me a job at the airport – baggage handling, night shifts, shitty work, you know?' Ricardo was now working as the driver at our *pensión*, shuttling guests between the airport and bus terminals and other far-flung locations across the city.

'*Entonces*, so I was working late one night out on the tarmac where the baggage trains come in. It was a cold night and there were no clouds, and I was looking up at the stars when I saw the OVNI.'

'How did you know it was an OVNI?' I asked. 'How did you know it wasn't an aircraft?'

The lane we'd slipped into like a greased kayak was flowing fast and smooth and steady. Ricardo took his time answering.

'I saw many aircraft at Benito Juárez – in daylight, in rain, fog, smog, whatever. At night all aircraft flash these same lights: red, green and white, like *la bandera mexicana*, yeah?' And he pointed

to a miniature Mexican flag dangling from the rear-view mirror. 'But what I saw, and I tell you this because it's the truth, was not an aircraft. I saw a bright light, yellow-white, not red or green. And it wasn't moving like an aircraft. An aircraft comes in low to land, but the OVNI was hanging there in the air, coming closer and then pulling away again. I was terrified. I ran to my friend and said, "Look at that!" We watched the thing for four or five minutes, and then it just disappeared – I didn't see where it went.' Ricardo nodded solemnly, as if to square off the account against his memory.

'Why were you frightened, Ricardo?' I asked him.

'I'm not scared of anything that I can understand,' he replied, bristling. Perhaps subconsciously – or perhaps not – he stepped on the accelerator, pushing the VW faster down the highway. The tinny growl of the engine behind us rose in pitch, and the vehicle began vibrating alarmingly. Priscilla Jane, who was unable to follow the conversation in Spanish, looked at me in alarm. Ricardo took his eyes off the road for the first time, twisting around in the driver's seat to address us directly.

'But that thing I saw, I don't know what it was. Why was it watching me? Me! What did it want? I don't know, and no-one can tell me, and that – that scares me.'

Aside from *lucha libre*, Mexico's masked version of WWE-style wrestling, the other national sport is politics. Traditionally it's been a blood sport, although the current state of affairs is civil, more or less. As it turned out, Priscilla Jane and I would encounter our next UFO lead among a surging crowd of students, teachers and workers marching on the seat of government.

Sunday morning, crisp and cool at two thousand metres, and the Zócalo – Mexico City's main plaza, and the biggest in the world – was already filling with crowds. I thought nothing of it,

for the Zócalo was never truly empty; the Metropolitan Cathedral alone drew in thousands to attend the daily masses held in its gloomy chandelier-lit interior. Besides, I'd woken with a stultifying need for coffee that numbed the senses and dulled the wits – the Zapatistas could've rolled into town in puma-drawn chariots and I would still need a double espresso shot before thinking to seek asylum at the Australian embassy.

Priscilla Jane couldn't hide her apprehension. 'I think there's something happening in the Zócalo, Martin,' she said, and indeed at the moment the first siren went off. 'Maybe we should wait until things settle down before going out.'

I shook my head impatiently. 'It'll be fine,' I said. 'Protests happen all the time in Latin America. It's part of the political system over here.' Looking less than convinced, Priscilla Jane metaphorically stowed her misgivings in the little foolproof satchel she always carries on our travels together. On its side is the motto, *Seemed like a good idea at the time*.

By now protesters were streaming into the Zócalo in their tens of thousands. We met the surge of the crowd head on, on the very steps of the Cathedral. Linking arms, Priscilla Jane and I began pushing upstream as fireworks lit by protesters in the rear started bursting high above the square. Despite its size, this was not yet a Bastille-storming mob, but the hundreds of riot police forming ranks in the square – matte-black Kevlar beetles clustered around the entrance to the Presidential Palace – made it clear that the current administration was prepared to defend its privileges with force.

A small epiphany settled on my shoulders like the falling ash from the rockets detonating overhead. *I'm endangering not only myself, but also my dearest librarian-companion, for a cup of coffee. Dear lord, what have I become?*

'We're not going to make it!' Priscilla Jane gasped as a crowd-wave passed through us, a most disagreeable sensation if you're not used to it. She was right. We had become insignificant extras on a stage about to be stormed by the audience, and the Zócalo was our indifferent god. I realised Priscilla Jane was shouting over the crowd's roar.

'We've got to get out of the plaza, Martin!' This time I nodded without hesitation.

Lunging for a gap in the marchers, we dashed down a side street to find ourselves on an avenue of handsome fin-de-siècle apartment buildings. All the street-front stores were shuttered, but the gated entrance to an arcade leading deep into the recesses of the nearest apartment block lay open. Into this serendipitous bolthole we darted, only to find ourselves suddenly surrounded by sapphire eyes and gleaming teeth, leering at us with sinister intent.

The arcade, as it turned out, led into a courtyard lined with high-end optometrist shops and beauty parlours. A lonely espresso stand stood in the centre of the courtyard, folding chairs and tables utterly vacant. The uniformed waiter straightened smartly at our entrance. '*Café?*' he asked hopefully. Sheepishly, I shot Priscilla Jane a mute look of apology.

Above the roars of thousands of supporters, we listened from the sanctuary of the courtyard as politicians' voices boomed and hiccupped through banks of over-stressed loudspeakers. The sharp *cracks!* of fireworks ceased during the oration, but thankfully were not replaced by gunfire. Two volatile hours passed and then the protesters began dispersing, wandering back into the streets behind the Zócalo in a suddenly peaceful and contented mood. Tension drained away like grey effluent seeping into Mexico City's omnipresent sewer system (omnipresent more because of its smell than its efficiency), and with it our own anxiety ebbed.

Priscilla Jane and I joined the crowds promenading around the temporary *tianguí* markets that had sprung up in the Centro Histórico. While taking a rest on the steps of an ornate fountain, we noticed that the unassuming museum across the plaza, one of the many that were free on Sunday, sported an inordinately long queue. 'Which museum do you suppose that is?' Priscilla Jane asked aloud, in English. A stocky man in a baggy woollen vest and blue jeans sitting next to us glanced up at her words, but looked away in evident embarrassment. Rather than pretending he hadn't understood us, I decided to speak to him.

'*Hola, señor*,' I said with an open smile, 'excuse me for asking, but can you tell us why that museum is so popular?'

The man smiled in return, the corners of his eyes crinkling endearingly. 'Ah,' he replied in English, 'that is the Torture Museum! Very popular with the children of my city!'

'Torture Museum!' Priscilla Jane repeated aghast, adding with a shudder, 'I hope the displays aren't interactive.'

Our new companion – I'll call him 'Ulises' – introduced himself as a professor of ethnobotany (the study of the traditional use of plant medicines) at the heroically endowed UNAM, the National Autonomous University of Mexico. I explained to him that I'd completed a PhD myself.

'Melbourne University?' he asked, frowning slightly. 'When was your university founded?'

'About 1853, I think,' I told him. 'Give or take a couple of years.'

'Ah,' replied Ulises, shaking his head. 'A young university for a young country!'

Ulises had come into the City with his multigenerational family – prone to the odd crowd-wave and stochastic outburst itself – to hear Andrés López Obrador, the left-wing former mayor of Mexico City and self-styled 'Legitimate President of

Mexico' address his supporters beneath the very eyes of conservative president Felipe Calderón gazing down jealously from the windows of the Palacio Municipal. 'Half the Mexican people support Obrador,' Ulises explained, 'but the other half support Calderón. We do not know yet if we can win the next election. But our voices will be heard!'

For a moment I thought Ulises would say more, but instead he paused to watch two of his young grandchildren playing on the polished stone of the plaza. Decked out in their finest clothes, they were as resplendent as a coral garden – Ulises' family might have been the picture of modern socialistic Mexicans, but today was Sunday and they had dressed their children like it was communion.

The two little angels were now hitting each other with bright yellow balloons bearing the beaming face of López Obrador. They squealed with pleasure. Ulises suddenly glanced at me, a guarded sideways movement somewhere between frank conspiracy and covert assessment.

'I believe I can say such things to you,' Ulises said in English with a shrewd half-smile. 'You are at the University in Melbourne, no? I think, then, that you might have *leftist* ideas – but I do not want to guess your ideology!'

We chatted pleasantly with Ulises for a few minutes on the fountain steps. '*En serio*,' he added before we parted, 'you should consider visiting our Torture Museum. It is most informative and not so gruesome – at least not for Mexico.' Which hardly seemed like a ringing endorsement.

Priscilla Jane and I returned to strolling among the textile and food stalls. We bought steaming cups of lime-and-chilli-dressed *elotes*, wolfing down the juicy corn kernels in their tangy sauce with sudden hunger. Despite the pleasurable sense of being participants in a huge, free urban theatre experiment, I felt troubled by my

leave-taking of the friendly ethnobotanist. I'd told Ulises I had a PhD, but had held back from explaining my area of expertise. If Ulises could speak openly to complete strangers like us about his political allegiances (and in Latin America declaring your side can have the kind of consequences that redefine the concept of 'universal suffrage'), surely I could reveal my secret identity as a questing ufology-ologist?

Priscilla Jane noted my change of mood. 'You're thinking about something,' she said as we idly inspected a stand selling authentic Aztec jade masks (we would see these same masks in every marketplace in Mexico). I explained my ethical discomfort.

'Besides, Ulises might know something about UFO sightings in the City,' I tacked on disingenuously. Looking back, I realise now this was the real matter I felt conflicted about.

'Well, let's go back and ask him,' Priscilla Jane suggested reasonably.

'Are you kidding?' I gasped, horrified. 'I can't ask him about UFOs in front of his family! He probably believes in dialectical materialism and thinks UFOs are the *narcoticos* of the masses.' I was babbling now. 'I mean, it could come across as kind of insulting: "Sure, your country has three thousand years of history, your ancestors built cities far larger than anything in Europe without the use of the wheel: but could you tell me about the little grey men who fly around Popocatépetl?"' I was so distracted that I pronounced every syllable of *Po-po-ca-té-pe-tl* in its correct order, a linguistic feat I've not repeated since.

'Oh darling,' Priscilla Jane said with gentle exasperation. 'This is Mexico City. People would think you're crazy if you *hadn't* seen a UFO.'

Ulises and his family were where we'd left them. Before my courage deserted me I blurted out my story like a romanti-

cally confused seminarian (*do I love Lord Jesus, or Brother Jésus?*) at confession.

Ulises stared at me blankly for a moment. '*En serío . . .*' he finally said. Which proved to be the extent of his scepticism. 'No, no, I understand,' he assured me, 'you have written a history of these things in the sky. It is fascinating, and Mexico is the *Campeon Mundial* when it comes to OVNIs' – a wry observation on Mexican national prowess which led several of his grown sons to snigger appreciatively.

Relieved that I hadn't been directed to the nearest Metro station and asked to buy a one-way ticket out of town, I began asking Ulises and his family questions. Had they ever seen a UFO themselves? No, none of them, they all shook their heads. Where was the best place to talk to witnesses? Should we go to Popocatépetl?

'Nobody lives on *el Popo*,' Ulises countered, referring to the great mountain by its centuries-old nickname. 'It is an active volcano, no?' He looked at me as if to say, *don't tell me there are no active volcanoes in your country.*

Ulises and his family conferred amongst themselves. Finally he said, 'There is a place, not far from Mexico City, where people see OVNIs very often.'

'Where's that?' I asked with renewed excitement.

'A town called Tepoztlán,' Ulises said. 'Very beautiful, and very, very old. Older than the Aztecs. In the legends of this country Tepoztlán was where the flying *serpiente* Quetzalcoatl was born. Can you imagine? A god was born there!' and he smiled wildly, unable to conceal his delight at the mind-boggling concept. '*Bueno*,' and he whispered in the same conspiratorial tones he'd used to confess his socialist tendencies, 'if you are looking for real Mexican UFOs, go to Tepoztlán.'

Tepoztlán is a little over two hours by coach from Mexico City. The highway south soon quit the confines of the former lake bed in which Mexico City sits, climbing out of the great smog-bowl and into the highland state of Morelos. Thirty kilometres from the largest city in the Western Hemisphere and we were passing through fields of Arcadian loveliness, farmers tending their flocks of sheep under the shade of huge live-oaks. The corn grew straight and tall in the cooler, sunnier climate of the high country, while swathes of evergreen forest cloaked the ranges, bringing to mind the sierras of Andalucia. Beyond the calculated political act of renaming a conquered land, gazing across this bucolic landscape I could see why Mexico had once been called Nueva España.

Before long we entered a zone of serene, pine-clad volcanic uplands. Somewhere above us, invisible behind its bridal veil of obscuring mists, the great stratovolcano Popocatépetl rose to its UFO-haunted apex. In all the time Priscilla Jane and I spent in the Valley of Mexico we never did see the great mountain, that potent symbol for the Mexican nation in all its towering aspirations and bottled-up, explosive contradictions.

Tepoztlán has been a weekend getaway for stressed-out citizens of the City since the Distrito Federal was still called Tenochtitlán and human sacrifices were popular after-dinner entertainment on Tuesdays and Fridays. Priscilla Jane and I found a sedate little *pueblo* of ancient churches and cobblestone streets where signs in the wondrously agglutinative Nahuatl language unfurled alongside their Spanish equivalents (the Nahuatl word for 'municipal library' is *Amoxtlahtolpialoyan*).

I recall Priscilla Jane clapping her hands with pleasure at the gaudy array of tropical fruits in the central marketplace; I could only admire the fortitude of the sturdy Nahua women lugging

their wares to market under the midday sun, dressed in their elaborate layers of dresses, cardigans and aprons. The colourful knitted scarves worn by these same Nahua women also caught Priscilla Jane's eye. 'I'll get one for you,' I told her, acting the gallant. 'Whose do you want?' For a moment I actually considered rolling one of these old ladies for their fine woollen apparel, but on second thoughts I realised that any confrontation between myself and a Tepoztlán matriarch would certainly end with me lying face down in the marketplace, the pulped remains of an unripe avocado lying next to my unconscious body.

Ancient Mexica legend has it that the man-god Quetzalcoatl, also known as the Feathered Serpent, was born in this valley in the eons before the Olmecs raised the first cities of Meso-America. No shrine or tourist site marks the god's birthplace, but five hundred years of Catholic hegemony might have something to with that. Actually, I don't think I could stand it if Tepoztlán went the way of the extraterritorial enclaves of Cancun or Playa del Carmen, where monstrous hotel resorts rise concrete tier upon tier in the outward likeness of Mayan pyramids – only these neon-lit Molochs are dedicated to the gods of the greenback and the euro and are filled not with the fresh corpses of human sacrifice but the barely upright, shambling zombies of international package tourism . . . (I rant and I rave perhaps to conceal my own complicity in this global racket, a meridian-spanning black market of must-see sights and must-feel experiences, one-thousand-and-one places to endure before I die, or before I buy the next guidebook, whichever comes first.)

My enduring image of Tepoztlán, then, survives in no photograph or tourist brochure: an enormous and masterfully executed graffito of the Feathered Serpent on the ancient walls of one of

the town's many narrow lanes, iridescent green and blue and red, a mestizo style somewhere between Mayan hieroglyphic – angry helmeted ape with tongue of lightning – and suburban tag scrawled on subway wall.

Behind the town a limestone escarpment rises in a staggering series of broken spires and columns. Teetering on the precipice some four hundred metres high is the Pyramid of Tepozteco, an important archaeological site and major UFO hotspot. From the valley floor the gleaming white structure looks like something made with a child's building block set, giving it a distinctly unrealistic look. *Lego Blocks of the Gods* – another book title I'd save for later.

Next morning we rose early, but at these latitudes the tropical sun rises swiftly and with brutal intent. In the encroaching heat we passed many well-dressed (which is to say inappropriately dressed) day-trippers from Mexico City scattered in exhaustion along the rock-strewn path, only now realising their mistake. The vultures began circling lower. Good luck to the ugly little blighters, I thought (the vultures, not the panting bourgeoisie).

Feeling quite undone by the climb, Priscilla Jane and I finally arrived on the summit in a cloud of dust and sweat. A few steps around the pyramid's limestone flank brought into view the ceremonial staircase and the vertigo-inducing prospect it offered over the Valle Sagrada. Tepoztlán's grid, frayed around the edges where roads disappeared into farms and orchards, was startlingly clear, and its seven parish churches rose above the township like the spires of a Dürer woodcut. This truly was a god's eye view – or at least one commanded by the gods' representatives on Earth, those devout and steely-eyed Aztec priests who went about their grim task of keeping the gods satiated with smoke and blood and souls. I could think of no better place to roll

human sacrifices down blood-spattered stone steps to a cowed and terrified populace below.

(Wait a moment . . . wasn't that from *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*? Even now I'm still paying the price of watching too many adventure movies as a child.)

We had been on the summit scarce minutes when the wispy head of an elderly man appeared over the lip of the pyramid. The man sprinted up the last remaining steps to collapse exhausted where the sacrificial altar had been. He tore off his sweat-soaked singlet in one sodden motion to reveal a sixpack that would've been impressive on someone half his age. This old man was seriously *cut*.

'*Oye, chico*,' he said, dilated pupils settling on me (why is it always me?), 'how long did you take to get to the top?'

It had taken us just over an hour to climb the escarpment, we decided. 'Say an hour and a half,' Priscilla Jane suggested, 'in case it's taken him all morning.' I relayed this information to the still-panting man, who was listening to our exchange in English with obvious impatience.

'Ha!' he shouted triumphantly, startling the other folks on the pyramid and panicking a flock of roosting birds into flight. 'Thirty minutes! Beat that!'

I never did discover this elderly but fit gent's name, but he was full of helpful advice about travelling in Mexico. 'Forget Mexico City, you should go to the beach,' he insisted, and I think he meant *right now*. I had a sudden vision – surely he was one of those old men whose sole goal of their autumn years is to lie on the beach and refuse to wear any clothes except the teeniest of thongs and end up looking and sounding like a sea lion. *Arf arf!*

Pulling out my trusty pair of non-secateurs, I made a deft snip in the scraggly shrubbery of our conversation. '*Entonces*,'

I said, 'I've heard it said that UFOs built this pyramid. Do you think it's possible?'

The old man's response was immediate. 'No!' he cried emphatically (and another flock of birds flew up from the jungle canopy). He wagged an indignant finger beneath my chin. 'The Tepozteca people built this pyramid a long, long time ago. But,' he continued, mellowing his tone as if to concede a point, 'flying saucers *do* come to the Tepozteco, because these rocks have a special gravity. And not only in Tepoztlán – all through the Sacred Valley, you know, in Yautepec, where I'm from, and Amatlán also.'

'Have you seen an OVNI in the Sacred Valley?' I asked.

'No!' he shouted, shaking his head violently. And there was that finger again.

For this old man of the valley, no extraterrestrial intervention was required to build the Tepozteco pyramid in its insanely inaccessible location – only a foreigner would entertain such a crazy idea, the cranky old guy seemed to be saying. No, the pyramid was the work of ancient Mexicans honouring their pagan gods, unpleasant as their votitiary rites might have been.

And yet, faced with the so-called archaeological 'lateness' of New World cultures – the fact that large cities and other trappings of civilisation appeared in Egypt and Sumeria as early as 3500 BC, but not until about 1200 BC in the Americas – many Western historians and archaeologists have argued that pre-Columbian civilisations must have been jump-started by contact with foreign, more advanced cultures. All the usual suspects appear: Egyptians, Israelites, Phoenicians, Carthaginians, refugees from Atlantis and, since the rise of ancient astronaut theories in the 1960s, extraterrestrials.

Just as the New World is a leading contender for ancient extraterrestrial contact, it's also been a favourite case study for cultural diffusionism, the once influential theory of history that

provides the intellectual back-story to ancient astronauts. Cultural diffusionism proposes that civilisation can be traced back to a single source – all ancient astronaut theories did was to swap space-faring extraterrestrials for Egyptians or Sumerians

Cultural diffusionism enjoyed its heyday in the early decades of the twentieth century. The British school exemplified the discipline's preoccupations with progress and racial stereotypes (there were also German and Russian schools, which puts me in mind of the Tri-Wizard Quidditch Cup, only without the broomsticks). G. Elliot Smith, the Australian-born anatomist who holds the dubious honour of being the first person to X-ray a mummy, maintained that Egypt was the ultimate source of all civilisation. In the beginning (says Smith in his 1928 book *In the Beginning*), 'Natural Man' existed without knowledge of 'domesticated animals, agriculture, houses, clothing, religion, social organization, hereditary chiefs, and formal laws or ceremonies of marriage or burial' – kind of like *Lord of the Flies* but without the school ties and British understatement.

But then about five thousand years ago Egypt invented Civilisation through the fortunate accident of being situated in a fertile river valley where regular spring floods stimulated the development of agriculture and hence a structured society. Civilisation spread as Egyptian traders and settlers dispersed throughout the Mediterranean in search of ores, wood and precious jewels. Hairy barbarians everywhere imitated Egyptian culture, baulking only at the adoption of male eyeliner, which never really caught on among the warlike Celts and Hittites and Cimmerians. 'I became convinced that the rude stone monuments of the Mediterranean littoral and Western Europe were not really the most primitive stages in the evolution of architecture,' Smith writes, 'but were crude copies of the more finished and earlier monuments of the Pyramid Age in Egypt . . .'

From Egypt the gift of Civilisation was passed like a baton to Greece, Rome, and finally the West, who sprinted across the finishing line to rapturous applause. This might sound like a cooperative effort, but I ask, does anybody ever remember who *starts* a relay race? And where's China and India in this meet – was pre-Columbian America even notified of the try-outs?

Inevitably, some cultures fall by the trackside of History because they are not fast enough to stay in the running. Other cultures become decadent and corrupt, preferring to watch the races from cushy corporate boxes where there's Bollinger on tap and nubile UN interpreters serving freshly squeezed caviar. This is where cultural diffusionist theories usually placed New World cultures on the scale of civilisation: somewhere above Africa but well below Europe or Asia. Great empires like Chavín de Huántar, Tiahuanaco, Teotihuacán, the Maya, the Aztecs and the Incas were summarily dismissed as stagnant evolutionarily cul-de-sacs that only survived as long as they did thanks to the hothouse isolation of the Americas.

Nowadays cultural diffusionism is viewed by most academics with embarrassment, an uncomfortable reminder of a time when anthropology could chauvinistically exempt itself from the kind of scrutiny it breezily expected its subjects to endure. To be fair, some things do seem to work along the lines of cultural diffusionism – it's well documented that all modern European alphabets can be traced back to the Phoenicians, who passed their startling invention on to the Greeks who, after thoughtfully adding vowels, gifted it to Rome – and now here I am writing this potted history of typography in Times New Roman.

But there's still too much in world history that can only be explained by parallel or independent innovation. Some New World cultures, like the Maya and the Aztecs for instance, developed their own systems of writing, a mixture of pictograms

and phonetics so unlike anything from the Old World that modern scholars couldn't decipher these ancient inscriptions until only a few decades ago. If the Egyptians gave the Maya their passion for pyramidal architecture, why didn't they pass on the gift of writing and the wheel at the same time? And why didn't the Egyptians think to bring back tomatoes, potatoes, corn, chocolate, and all those other staple crops from the Americas the world now takes for granted? (A note to archaeologists: if you really must have conclusive evidence for cultural diffusionism, look for traces of guacamole in King Tut's tomb.)

Evidence of Tepoztlán's reputation as an epicentre for UFO sightings lay all around us, mainly in the form of deliciously crap tourist kitsch displayed like religious icons on postcards, posters, shop signs, even the odd *camioneta*. On the wall of one restaurant we saw photos of a glowing red UFO; the framed polaroids, now faded with age, hung among constellations of autographed snapshots of Mexican *telenovela* stars (big smiles, bigger hair). I took a closer look at these UFO photos, aware that the waiting staff were watching me from a safe distance. The images were signed by one Carlos Diaz, a name that kept turning up in our investigations.

'*OVNIs*?' the proprietor of our hotel mused, blinking profusely (an unfortunate nervous tic that seized him only whenever he spoke to other people). 'Try talking with Señor Carlos Diaz, he knows all about OVNIs. He was taken away in one, you know.' Where could we find Señor Carlos? I asked. The proprietor blinked a bit more. 'Try down by La Conchita,' he said confidently. 'Just ask around, everybody knows Carlos Diaz.'

But the thing was, no-one knew where to find Carlos. A woman who worked in a market stall thought he had moved to

Mexico City; a waiter in a café was certain he had died. The elusive La Conchita became a mystery itself – everyone in town spoke familiarly of its existence, and yet no-one could explain exactly where or what it was. 'Is it a street?' I asked. No, it wasn't. What is it, a house, then? A hotel? 'It's a place,' a woman we met in a bakery offered. What kind of place? 'Just a place,' she shrugged.

As it turned out, Priscilla Jane and I had passed La Conchita many times in the search for Carlos. Set into the retaining wall of Tepoztlán's oldest churchyard is a shrine to the Virgin of Guadalupe, patron protector of Mexico and reigning Empress of the Americas. The Virgin's shrine had been painted a gentle sky blue and moulded in the shape of an open seashell – hence the name in Spanish, *La Conchita*, the little seashell.

Clearly Carlos the Ufologist did not live in this humble Marian shrine. We never did find him, and subsequent googling turned up only the scantiest information of his current whereabouts – if you're out there somewhere, Carlos, *que te vayas bien, hermano.*

Nonetheless, the search for this shadowy character yielded its own results, as it brought us into contact with OVNI witnesses in the streets and marketplaces of Tepoztlán. I spoke at length with a young woman called Tonantzín, a name she shared with the Aztec Earth goddess. Tonantzín claimed to have seen OVNIs in the Sacred Valley on many occasions. In her words, the OVNIs appeared as bright lights in the night sky that flashed past the Tepozteco cliffs, sometimes dividing into two or three smaller lights before finally speeding into the rock face itself, where they flared out of existence. I asked Tonantzín what she thought the objects were.

'I feel they want to make contact,' she replied. 'But they come here for the rocks – the rocks in the Sacred Valley have a special energy which the OVNIs use to travel between the worlds.'

I asked her if she thought the OVNIs were actual spacecraft, built by an unknown alien supertechnology. She looked unconvinced.

'*Se puede ser*,' she replied sceptically. 'It may be so. Perhaps the OVNIs are material some of the time, but I do not think they are *all* the time. Otherwise how can they disappear into rock if they are solid, like an aeroplane or a helicopter?'

And then there was Doña Maura, who we met on the day of our climb to the Tepozteco. Coming back down the trail in the full tropical ripeness of the midday sun, Priscilla Jane and I were suspended in a delirium that was half exhaustion, half dehydration and half ravenous hunger. We stopped at the first *comedor* we could find, where a tourist in a blue canvas hat sat sweating profusely, devouring a plate of quesadillas with loud and unselfconscious abandon the way you used to eat fish and chips or hamburgers or whatever your favourite food was when you were five. *He's just come down from the Tepozteco too*, I guessed, and my own hunger redoubled in an instant. The sweating man looked up at that moment.

'Hullo there!' he called out in an English accent. 'These are simply *the best* quesadillas in town. You must try them!' Priscilla Jane and I needed no further recommendation, and took seats at the friendly Englishman's table.

We were joined by a woman in an apron and blue cotton dress. She took in the tableau of dusty *gringuitos* with a glance. 'Quesadillas or gorditas?' she asked, raising an eyebrow. 'Or both?'

Her name was Doña Isabella Ortiz Maura, and she took her cooking seriously – but little else, it seemed. She had broad Nahua features, high cheekbones emphasised by a long ponytail pulled back tightly in the village style. And I thought to myself, here's this woman, she's maybe fifty years old and is bilingual in Nahuatl and Spanish, probably married young, who knows

if she's ever left Mexico or even the Valle Sagrada – but that is the damn well *cheekiest* face I've seen this side of the inaugural International Convention of Satirists and Nonconformist Comedians in downtown Vegas!

'Your cooking comes highly recommended, Señora,' I told her.

She inclined her head graciously. 'You can only know for sure if you try it, *caballero*.'

Priscilla Jane, who as you know is a librarian and hence equipped with uncanny powers of perception, didn't need her sixth sense to notice the changed tenor to our Spanish conversation. 'Martin, are you *flirting*?' she asked, almost laughing with incredulity (almost).

'What? No, I'm just ordering us quesadillas!' I recovered falteringly. 'How many would you like, my sweet?'

Doña Maura brought freshly made bluecorn quesadillas to our table, served with marinated *nopales*, thinly sliced cactus paddles plucked of their spines and peeled of the fibrous outer skin to leave the tender, green flesh inside. They really were the best quesadillas in town, and possibly all of Mexico. After a few moments a craggy-faced man in an enormous *ranchero* hat who I took to be Doña Maura's husband joined us, taking up position in a rickety-looking rocking chair. He nodded in our direction, accepting a heaped plate of quesadillas from his bustling wife.

Meanwhile, the English tourist at our table continued talking between mouthfuls of food, telling us he was forty-seven years old and looking for the perfect Mexican *pueblo mágico* where he could retire. 'Somewhere far, far away from other Brits,' he said wistfully. 'So definitely *not* the Costa del Sol! Y'know, Tepoztlán might just be the place for me,' he concluded. I noted that he had sunblock smeared through his stubble.

The following day Priscilla Jane and I returned to Doña Maura's *comedor* for lunch. 'Back for more, I see,' she said. 'Be sure to tell people about my quesadillas, no?'

After we finished our meals I was seized by a sudden impulse and said, 'Doña Maura, do you know of any UFO stories in Tepoztlán?' Living directly beneath the Tepozteco as she did, I figured Doña Maura was in a prime position to hear accounts of high strangeness from the many visitors climbing to the pyramid each day.

Her eyes widened in outrage. 'Those are not just stories, *joven*,' she scolded, 'they are truths!' And with a calloused finger she pointed to her eye. 'These eyes of mine have seen UFOs! This I swear to you. If you don't believe me, go ahead and ask my husband.'

'*Sí, es verdadero*,' her husband said softly, rocking back on his chair. He may have nodded also, but the *ranchero* hat he still wore was so large it was hard to tell.

Doña Maura took a seat at our table. Smoothing out the pleats of her blue dress with her strong, brown hands, she related the story of her UFO sighting.

'*Bueno*, this happened some years ago, before my children were born. My husband and I were driving through the mountains one night when we saw a shining yellow disc flying through the air. It came so close that I had to shut my eyes against the brightness, and then it sped off into the darkness.'

'Were you frightened, Doña Maura?' I asked

'No! It was a beautiful sight. It meant us no harm.'

'What do you think you saw?'

She shrugged. 'It was – what do you call it? – an OVNI from another planet, another galaxy maybe. But I was not scared.'

I nodded. 'Why do you think OVNIs come to Tepoztlán, Doña Maura?'

She mulled this over for a moment. It was always the question that witnesses felt most unsure of. 'To watch us,' she said thoughtfully. 'And for the rocks; they have a special energy here. These mountains are magical places.'

Doña Maura's teenage daughter, who'd come outside to listen to the odd conversation, suppressed a snicker at this last claim; either that or she found the attention her mother was getting from these gringos to be misplaced. You never think your mother is interesting when you're fifteen, even if she does make the best quesadillas in the country. I directed my next question to the plainly amused girl.

'Do you think UFOs are real?' I asked.

'I don't know, *I've* never seen one,' she replied, squirming under her mother's imperious gaze.

'What are you saying, *mi hija!* These eyes of mine have seen UFOs!' scolded Doña Maura, and her daughter giggled again.

'*Sí, es verdadero*,' echoed her husband once again, rocking back so far on his chair I wanted to leap up and catch him. But now Doña Maura was trying not laugh as well.

'You'd better believe UFOs are real!' she exclaimed. 'Would you believe me then if the extraterrestrials took me away?' Doña Maura's whole family was laughing. She turned to Priscilla Jane and myself. 'Next time you come here I could be gone! Pssh! *No más!*'

At this point I'll raise a question that you might have already asked yourself: how can I be sure that Doña Maura – or any of the witnesses I met in my travels – wasn't actually lying to me?

Perhaps you can guess my response. It hardly matters to me either way, for I'm not seeking the Truth. My act of sacrilege in the Church of Ufology is to declare baldly: I really do not care if UFOs exist or not. My gut feeling was that Doña Maura wasn't lying, but if she was having me on, if she was telling tall tales to

a gringo because that's what he wanted to hear, then I shall pass on my way no less disappointed. Even in fiction there is meaning and significance that points to other truths. A truth doesn't have to be *real* for it to exist and exert influence in a given culture. For when you think about it, this is how most belief systems work, as constructed truths that order our lives and our thinking and, ultimately, our very sense of self.

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ALIEN ABDUCTEES:
THE MISSING STORY

After leaving Tepoztlán, Priscilla Jane and I wandered the country in search of a ufological version of the Aztecs' sign from the gods – but instead of an eagle eating a snake on a cactus on an island, I guess we were looking for Mothman chomping a space brother inside a flying saucer hovering over an ancient astronaut temple. This being Mexico, I considered our chances to be pretty good.

I continued to make discreet inquiries about UFO sightings in conjunction with sacred rocks or other ancient sites wherever we travelled, hoping to pick up the trail we'd hit upon in Tepoztlán, but to no avail. The confidence I'd felt a month earlier upon our arrival in Mexico City began to ebb, and I was at a loss as to how to continue our search.

'Darling, I think you're being a bit hard on yourself,' Priscilla Jane was saying to me, her glasses glinting in the morning sunlight. We were having a breakfast of *chilaquiles* (essentially strips of fried tortilla bread baked in a piquant green tomatillo sauce) in the main plaza of Pátzcuaro, an antique highland town in Michoacán that I recall chiefly for the surrealistic wall mural in its municipal library, itself a deconsecrated sixteenth-century church.

I shook my head emphatically. 'But if I'm not hard on myself, who will be?' Priscilla Jane laughed in mock exasperation. After a moment I did too, ruefully.

'You've only just finished a PhD,' she continued after a moment, serious once more, 'which took, how long was it? Seven years?'

'Seven and a bit,' I agreed.

'Well, there you go. Maybe it's just too much to expect to come over to Mexico and find instant results,' she pointed out.

The plaza was slowly coming to life. Beneath thatched awnings and cracked stone arcades fruit and vegetable sellers were setting up their goods, attracting clouds of sluggish bees and darting wasps. Michoacán was undoubtedly one of the most beautiful of Mexico's thirty-one states, but damn it had a lot of insects!

'It seems to me that nobody ever found a UFO by going out and looking for it,' Priscilla Jane mused. 'Maybe that's it – perhaps we should wait for them to come to us.'

I pondered this for a moment. It was the whole Achilles chasing the tortoise thing again – if brave Achilles ran at his usual fleet-footed pace he'd either always have the tortoise just a little ahead of him, just out of reach, or he'd overshoot the plodding reptile entirely. Except I was no Achaean hero and UFOs moved much faster than any terrapin I'd ever known.

'Before we left home you promised this trip would be a holiday for us, too,' Priscilla Jane said in an altogether different tone of voice. She gently took my hand in hers. 'The UFOs will show themselves when they're ready. What *we* need to do now,' and she started stroking a finger in little circles in the palm of my hand, 'is go find a beach with lovely, warm water, and rest for a while. Just for a week. What do you think? Darling?'

I realised I'd just been made an offer I couldn't – no, *shouldn't*, by the alien gods – turn down.

Many non-ufologists I've met over the years seem to think that alien abductions and UFOs go pretty much hand in hand (or hand in tentacle, as it might be). You see a UFO, you get abducted – what else did you expect?

What people don't often realise is that for a significant stretch of ufology's history alien abductions didn't exist. Of course, ufologists say abductions simply weren't *recognised* earlier. 'Ah hah!' our representative alien abduction researcher might say, 'Tales of humans being kidnapped by faeries were really alien abductions – only the concept of extraterrestrial life was incomprehensible to the pre-scientific, superstition-riddled Middle Ages, so supernatural beings were blamed instead!' Honestly, there's no way of proving or disproving this contention, so personally I consider it better left unsaid.

Although there's no such thing as a 'typical' alien abduction experience, there are certain elements that appear in these extraterrestrial-gothic stories over and over again. The abductee might be lying in bed or driving late at night when they become aware of a bright light in the sky, moving with malevolent purpose. Panicking, the abductee tries to turn around the car, get out of the house, call for help, but instead . . . some time later they wake up, alone in the house or sitting calmly at the wheel, seemingly unharmed but aware of a gap in their memories which, try as they might, they cannot remember.

This is called 'missing time', a gaping hole in reality that slowly fills with the seeping images of nightmare, a terrifying absence that is the identifying mark of the abductee. Abductees develop sudden, irrational fears of animals with large eyes, or of bright objects in the sky; they cannot endure being left alone at night.

For the abductee the question is not 'What did I see?' but rather 'What happened to me?' Like a diver entering a submerged wreck or a master criminal cracking a safe, opening the locked vault of missing time is not without its dangers, especially when your tool is the sonic screwdriver of psychotherapy – that worm ourobouros of talking cures – hypnosis. Sadly, as physicists have long been ruefully aware, sometimes in the act of observing a phenomenon you change it, and this is manifestly true of hypnosis . . . but I'll get to that in a minute.

Like the ufological jubilee year of 1947, alien abductions have their own watershed: 1961. Before this date there were just three kinds of Close Encounters; after it, a whole new dimension of ufological witnesses, accounts and research.

The first abductees of the modern ufological era were a middle-aged married couple from Portland, Maine, whose names were Barney and Betty Hill. What's always struck me about Barney and Betty is how respectable they were for the godparents of alien abductees. Both were heavily involved in the Civil Rights Movement, not surprising perhaps considering that, while Betty was as white as the New England snow, Barney was African-American. In the United States of 1961 an interracial couple was almost as rare as a scientifically credible UFO encounter, and it was this feature of the Hills' marriage that would have direct and unexpected influence on the 'uncovery' of their missing time, which took place during a course of hypnotic therapy the couple undertook for anxiety symptoms contracted after seeing a UFO in late 1961. (And for the record, Fred and Wilma's neighbours in *The Flintstones* were named after the abductees, not the other way around.)

Barney and Betty Hill's abduction began as a simple UFO sighting registering, perhaps, at around 4 out of 10 on the scale of high strangeness. Returning from a vacation in Canada, the

couple were driving through an empty stretch of road in New Hampshire's White Mountains when they spotted a brightly lit flying saucer hanging in the night sky.

The terror begins quietly. Like many UFO witnesses, Barney and Betty's first response is to grope for a plausible, reasonable explanation. Perhaps the object is a satellite, in 1961 still a marvel of science; or a commercial plane en route to Canada; or a shooting star. Barney stops the car so Betty can get a better look at the thing through binoculars, originally packed for their sightseeing tour of Quebec. While she peers into the night sky Barney quietly retrieves a pistol he has secretly stashed away in the boot of the car.

This is not an aircraft, Betty decides. Barney is more sceptical, but perhaps it's easier to be so with a gun in your pocket.

Back on the road, Barney tries to elude the saucer but it easily keeps pace. Delsey, the couple's pet dachshund, whimpers pitiably from beneath the front seat. The *thing* is getting closer!

Panic suddenly takes hold of Barney, and he brings the car to a screeching halt. Perhaps realising the futility of armed resistance, he swaps pistol for binoculars and steps onto the road. For reasons unknown to himself – an inborn defiance of those who would terrorise him, perhaps – he takes a closer look at his tormenters.

Through the binoculars Barney sees the craft has windows, revealing a brightly lit interior filled with instrumentation and flashing lights. About ten humanoid beings stare back at him. One of the figures, who Barney feels sure is the craft's commander, transfixes him with an alien stare: *Stay where you are. Do not look away.*

But the spell over Barney is broken. 'They're going to capture us!' he shouts in terror, and leaps back into the car to send it careering down the mountain road. The saucer follows.

If this were a car chase in an action movie, something dramatic would happen now. Barney could lose control of the vehicle around

a tight bend, sending the car sailing out into the darkness. Or: the saucer could latch onto the roof of the car and lift it cleanly off the road. Or: the Hills could outrun the saucer, making it to the outskirts of civilisation and safety. Instead, nothing happens.

A buzzing electronic-sounding noise fills the car, causing the vehicle to gently vibrate. An undefinable 'haze' descends upon the Hills, making them feel sleepy and drowsy. The road continues, the stars shine. Soon it is another road, and they are still driving. When they finally arrive home Barney and Betty realise the journey has taken two more hours than could be accounted for. Until the empty gap of missing time is introduced, the Hills' account is a conventional UFO sighting – into this breach rushes the vacuum of the real, sweeping the Hills along in its wake.

The mountains of the Sierra Madre aren't as popular with alien abductors as the White Mountains of New Hampshire, but they are more remote and just as wild. Priscilla Jane and I had taken a well-earned break from our travels at Puerto Escondido on the Pacific coast, but after a week of sunshine and warmth we were heading back into the Mexican heartland. An arduous crossing of the mountains by bus now loomed between us and the southern city of Oaxaca, which we hoped to reach before the Christmas holidays shut down transport across the country.

Some of the most inaccessible country in all of Mexico can be found in the Sierra Madre, a swathe of rugged and thickly forested ranges backing the Pacific. Towns here are few and far between; the southern forest crowds hungrily about the verges of the highway, thickets of bamboo and fan-leafed palms jostling among the pines and oaks in this denser, more tropical environment. The local mountain people believe that the semi-mythical *onza*, a rarely glimpsed cryptid said to be the unnatural offspring of a

cougar and a wolf, roams these mountains; but the forest flashed past in an endless green curtain, revealing nothing.

Throughout the long journey our driver, a moustachioed man in his early thirties, handled the coach with all the care and respect the treacherous road demanded. By the time the bus pulled into Oaxaca, Christmas Eve was fast upon us. Around the terminal the streets were choked with citizens escaping the city for the holiday, packed indiscriminately into (and onto) cars, buses, *camionetas*, *motocarros*, bicycles, even the odd *burro*. The journey from the coast had finally taken some sixteen hours, and I seriously questioned my ability ever to set foot inside a bus again.

As we disembarked from the coach I felt moved to express my gratitude to the driver. '*Gracias*, *señor conductor*,' I told him. 'Thank you for bringing us here safely.'

The man appeared mortified at my praise. 'No, thank you, *caballero*,' he said with deep remorse, 'but I know I drive too slowly.' And perhaps by Mexican standards this was true, but if any one of the other passengers dared complain they'd have to deal with me first.

A gorgeous colonial city the colour of dusky sandstone, Oaxaca lies in a high valley at the centre of the rugged state of the same name. At nearly a mile above sea level, the air stays cool and dry in the city, which is at once vertiginously ancient and yet slickly modern. Barely twenty minutes from the thronging central plaza, the citadel of Monte Albán rises above the valley, once the great capital of the Zapotec Empire but now a cluster of serried ruins perched atop a hilltop whose dramatic setting is rivalled in the Americas only by Machu Picchu in Peru. But Oaxaca is also the centre of the contemporary art scene in Mexico, and dotted along its graceful colonial streets are scores of galleries, museums and workshops.

I had made sure to reserve accommodation in Oaxaca some days earlier over the phone, as the city is often booked solid over the Christmas break by so-called 'snowbirds,' vacationers from the United States and Canada flying south for a warmer holiday. The taxi we'd somehow commandeered from the chaos at the bus terminal brought Priscilla Jane and I to a tiny colonial square called the Plaza de las Virgenes. A number of small shopfronts and cafés opened onto the plaza, among them the *pension* I had booked. We lugged our backpacks over the cobblestones, both of us looking forward to spending the rest of Christmas Eve fast asleep.

The door of the *pension* was open, a good sign despite the late hour of our arrival. Less reassuring was the large man who sat on its doorstep. Clad in a dirty white singlet, tattered jeans and a straw hat, he was methodically chopping at a heaped pile of chestnuts with a clumsy-looking machete. With each downward stroke he split open another nut, pausing to pry out the soft flesh inside and pop it into his slavering mouth.

Priscilla Jane and I exchanged nervous glances. 'Please don't tell me that's the manager,' she whispered out of the corner of her mouth.

I shook my head. 'I hope not,' I confessed. 'But this is the address, alright. Let me try talking to him.' I went up to the machete-wielding man and asked if this was the *pension* we were searching for.

'*Sí*,' the man replied, looking up at me with bloodshot eyes, masticating on a freshly shucked chestnut. He dug around in his pile of cracked shells for another kernel.

'Great,' I said, and relayed the news to Priscilla Jane. Feeling relieved, I explained to the man that we had a reservation for the night.

Now he looked at us more appreciably. 'What name?' he grunted.

I told him, and the man's eyebrows rose in recognition. 'Yes, I remember,' he said, chopping down into the nuts with the machete. 'But that room is taken now.' And he went back to ignoring us.

My first reaction was that he had misheard my name. So I repeated it. The man shook his head again.

'That's right,' he confirmed, irritation creeping into his voice, 'I gave that room away. We're full. Go somewhere else.'

I stared at him for a moment before I felt the sudden, flaring heat of righteous indignation run through me like chilli through drinking chocolate. After so many hours on the road my nerves were frayed, and the thought of a bed to collapse into overrode every native inclination towards caution and tact.

'What do you mean you gave the room to someone else?' I demanded. 'That was you I spoke to on the phone, wasn't it? I booked that room days ago!'

'Listen, buddy,' the man growled, 'the latest check-in time is five o'clock, and you're more than five hours late. Tonight is Christmas Eve, in case you didn't notice, and there's lots of people in town wanting a room. I couldn't wait for you. That's it. Go find somewhere else.' With those last words he brought the machete down upon the pile of nuts with increased force, so that several chestnuts bounced and clattered across the cobblestones like severed knucklebones.

'You never told me there was a check-in time over the phone! Do you know how long we've travelled to get here?' The man glared at me with real loathing. I was ready to argue the point further when Priscilla Jane grasped my arm. 'Leave it, Martin,' she urged. 'We can find somewhere else.'

'What?' I exclaimed in exasperation. 'Cilla, this guy gave our room away. He can't do that!'

Priscilla Jane was shaking her head. 'No, he can't, *but he's got a machete*.'

This was true. I looked at it now, the blade long and dull and nicked along its cutting edge. A cruel weapon, no doubt about it. And then I noticed the open bottle of mezcal next to the pile of nuts, a good third of it already gone. Hence the bloodshot eyes and belligerence. The man turned his head and spat out a fragment of chestnut shell. Christmas, I knew, could be an unhappy time for many people, and perhaps the manager of the *pension* was feeling the full weight of the festive season. I realised I had no desire to involve Priscilla Jane and I in his private misery, especially if it meant making the acquaintance of the wrong end of a machete.

Feeling defeated, we shouldered our backpacks to one of the cafés still open in the plaza and ordered two mugs of Oaxacan chocolate, made in the traditional style without milk. It arrived scalding hot, our first meal for many hours. With extreme weariness I pulled out our increasingly worn guidebook and began looking through lists of accommodation in town. In the streets outside the Christmas Eve festivities were starting to pick up, the sounds of fireworks and marching bands resounding off the sandstone walls of the old city like gunfire in a canyon.

I called three *hospedajes* in quick succession but all were completely booked out. Our situation was beginning to look desperate – John Lennon may have said the Beatles were bigger than Jesus, but right now I felt closer to poor Mary and Joseph arriving in Bethlehem on Christmas Eve without a reservation. Certainly, at this point a manger looked positively inviting.

A woman with a great halo of curly brown hair was watching our efforts from where she sat at an adjacent table, sipping her own hot chocolate. She caught my eye and smiled sympathetically.

'*Podría ayudarte?*' she asked, and then in American-accented English, 'Do you need some help?'

Priscilla Jane and I explained our plight. The curly-haired woman nodded in thought.

'Give me a minute,' she said, 'I'll get the phone directory from the shop.' And with that she jumped up and was out the door of the café, only to return literally a minute later with a rather anaemic-looking phonebook. She opened it to the accommodation pages. 'I can tell you which *pensiones* are close to the city centre,' she offered with a smile of encouragement.

The second entry from the phonebook had a room available. 'And it's nearby,' the woman whispered to me. I took the vacancy without a second thought.

More fireworks were being let off outside. The café began to empty as people made their way down to the *zócalo* a few blocks away, where the various Nativity parades were converging for the ringing of the cathedral bells at midnight. We thanked the curly-haired woman profusely for her help, but she shook our attentions away with an embarrassed wave.

'My name's Elsa,' the woman said with a warm smile. 'My pottery store is just next door – look for the name, Tierra Quebrada. If you're staying in Oaxaca for a few days why don't you come past the shop, say, the day after Christmas? We can grab a chocolate here again.'

'That would be lovely,' Priscilla Jane said. Little did she know that she had just met her first alien abductee.

Over the months following their UFO sighting and the missing time that punctuated it – no, *punctured* would be a better word – Barney suffered terribly from chronic stomach ulcers, a condition that predated the UFO encounter but which now afflicted him

worse than ever. More ominously, Betty was plagued by recurring nightmares in which she was taken on board the shining saucer and surrounded by strange little men with scary, oversize eyes . . .

But it was the period of missing time that became their chief source of anxiety. What had happened in those lost two hours? Why had the saucer disappeared so abruptly? They began looking for answers.

Barney finally confided in a friend, a former US Air Force Intelligence officer who suggested the couple try recovering their missing time through hypnotic regression therapy, which had been used in the Air Force to rehabilitate servicemen suffering from post-traumatic stress disorders. Finally in March 1963, nearly eighteen months after the UFO sighting, Barney and Betty were referred to hypnosis expert Dr Benjamin Simon, with quite fateful consequences.

At that time Simon was a successful consulting psychiatrist, servicing New England's neurotics from his comfortable Boston practice. His fascination with hypnosis went back decades – during World War II he had championed its use while serving as Executive Officer and Chief of Neuropsychiatry at Mason General Hospital, then the US Army's main psychiatric rehabilitation facility.

Simon did not turn his new patients away, but one thing must be made clear from the outset: when it came to UFOs, Simon was a sceptic, and remained one until the end of his days. French ufologist Jacques Vallee recalled meeting Simon in 1967, describing him as 'a sly old practitioner, an empiricist of vast experience. In my opinion he doesn't really care whether or not they have been abducted: that is not relevant to his psychiatric assessment . . .' But here's the twist in the tale: if Simon hadn't been a diehard sceptic, if he had not *absolutely refused* to consider

even the possibility that Barney and Betty Hill had encountered a UFO, nobody would believe in alien abductions today.

Simon was sure that the Hills' anxiety stemmed from the stress of maintaining an interracial marriage in pre-Civil Rights America and Barney's emotionally fraught relationship with a son from a previous marriage. Hypnosis, then, would expose the truth behind the Hills' odd ufological symptoms. I can only imagine the good doctor's surprise when the Hills began to remember instead a shocking and completely unexpected sequence of memories.

Soon after entering hypnosis, Barney remembered how he had felt compelled to pull off the highway and drive into the woods, where he was stopped by six humanoid beings. He and Betty were carried, paralysed and unprotesting, into the saucer.

Once inside the spacecraft Barney's hypnotic narrative became broken and fragmented, for he kept his eyes shut to block out the terror of things his mind refused to accept. Taken into a room filled with strange medical-looking instruments, Barney was undressed and laid onto a rectangular table. Machinery purred. A cup-like device was fitted over his genitals which, Barney believed, was used to extract a sperm sample. Making its debut in the annals of ufology, Barney was next subjected to the humiliation of an anal probe, while other beings scratched, poked and peered intently at his body. One counted Barney's vertebrae with fascination. Why?

Betty, who Simon hypnotised separately to try to prevent the couple from slipping into the shared fantasy scenarios of confabulation, reported a broadly similar but more detailed account. Betty had always been made of sterner stuff than her gentle husband – she had kept her eyes *open* while inside the saucer. She now remembered conversations with her strange captors, as recounted in journalist John G. Fuller's bestselling account of the Hills' story, *The Interrupted Journey*:

> Betty: So they roll me over on my back, and the examiner has a long needle in his hand. And it's bigger than any needle that I've ever seen. And I ask him what he's going to do with it . . .
>
> *(She is beginning to get upset again.)*
>
> It won't hurt me. And I ask him what, and he said he just wants to put it in my navel, it's just a simple test.
>
> *(More rapid sobbing.)*
>
> And I tell him, no, it will hurt, don't do it, don't do it. And I'm crying, and I'm telling him, 'It's hurting, it's hurting, take it out, take it out!' And the leader comes over and he puts his hand, rubs his hands in front of my eyes, and he says it will be all right. I won't feel it.
>
> *(She becomes calmer.)*
>
> And all the pain goes away. The pain goes away, but I'm still sore from where he put that needle.

Betty also recalled the alien leader showing her a three-dimensional 'star map'. Based on her post-hypnotic sketches, ufologists have determined the aliens' homeworld to lie somewhere in the vicinity of Zeta Reticuli, which sounds to me like something out of *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*.

Soon after this unexplained tactical error on the aliens' part, the couple were dressed and returned to their car. Senses dulled, they watched the UFO take off. Moving like an automaton, Barney began driving again. Only when they heard the electronic buzzing sound did Barney and Betty regain full consciousness, but, like hypnotised subjects coming awake with a snap of the mesmerist's fingers, they had forgotten the entire sequence of events.

Recall the proverbial elephant in the room; we step carefully around its great umbrella-stand toes, crawl beneath its swaying

belly, try not to slip in its poo but, for the love of the gods, *don't mention that it's there!* Imagine, then, that we remove the elephant (presumably by the same way it got in – through the window, of course). Suddenly there is too much space in the room. The void, the great sucking void that lies at the heart of things – it must be plugged up, filled in, cancelled out by the presence of something, anything. And you wonder why we let television into our lives so readily . . .

This is how I like to think of the real sometimes. It doesn't have to be something huge and cataclysmic smashing through the stratosphere of reality, nor as terrifying as Mothman peering through the kitchen window as you eat dinner. Sometimes the real is simply what's not there, what's gone away. For Barney and Betty Hill, it was two hours of missing time lost while fleeing through the night. They had to remember what wasn't there, and this is where hypnosis takes a starring role in the highly strange story of alien abductions.

Historically, hypnosis was first used to treat psychopathology in the nineteenth century, a period when medical understandings of the inner workings of the mind were still only this side of the medieval and any treatment, no matter how bizarre or painful, was tried in the hope that *something* would work. Even Sigmund Freud, whose patented 'talking cure' (a.k.a. psychoanalysis) would eventually come out on top as the therapy preferred by nine out of ten psychiatrists, used hypnosis to treat intransigent patients in the early part of his career (for the Freud-spotters out there, this was when he was still playing Abbott to Josef Breuer's Costello).

These days psychotherapists talk about the 'role-play' or 'dramaturgical' model of hypnosis. Despite sounding like dressing up like Vulcans and pretending to be on *Star Trek*, this theory

asks us to imagine hypnosis as an interactive and collaborative encounter between patient and hypnotist, where the hypnotist's questions allow the patient to organise certain sequences of memory into meaningful narratives.

Ufologists would surely laugh at such an ambiguously worded description. Ironically, Simon would've agreed with them. In 1963 Simon explicitly believed that hypnosis gave access to hidden recesses of the unconscious, where the toxic memories of repressed trauma burrow deep into the membrane of the psyche like monstrous tropical ticks. However, his was the minority view at the time, which makes the chain of events that ultimately produced the world's first alien abductees all the more remarkable.

In 1931 a psychiatrist from Munich called Gustav Heyer – who I pictured tucking into long, pink, Freudian sausages prepared by his buxom hausfrau after a hard day's work in his practice on Traumdeutungstrasse – described hypnosis in unreservedly scathing terms. The idea that hypnotised patients were 'unfree,' Heyer explains:

> 'Only at the command of a third person,' and recognising quite rightly that in all healing the physician should and can be only an auxiliary, one came to reject in fairly radical fashion the hypnotic therapy which until the era of Freud and Adler had been employed almost exclusively and certainly in excess.

Good call, mein Herr Doktor! No point in *forcing* patients to remember the very thing that screwed them up in the first place, eh? He was not alone in his thinking among the psychiatric profession, but even as Heyer wrote these words, hypnosis had staged a comeback, engorged on the suffering of that great and cataclysmic event that should've put an end to all our fooling around with guns and swords and hand grenades but really only provided the dress rehearsal for even worse conflicts to come.

The Great War, as it was called in the day, witnessed massacres on an unprecedented scale. More significant to the story of alien abductions, however, was a hitherto unacknowledged type of casualty – those soldiers bearing perhaps not a single scratch but nevertheless incapacitated by the most severe and traumatic of psychological wounds.

If a modern army was to continue fighting, a form of psychotherapy adapted to military use had become an absolute necessity. Military psychiatry emerged first in Russia in 1915, to be followed soon afterwards in Germany, France, Britain and the United States. In contrast to psychotherapy in its civilian setting, which sought to bring about psychological closure by slowly reintegrating the memory of trauma into a patient's life, the primary aim of early military psychiatry was to return those soldiers scarred by the experience of battle back to active service as soon as humanly – but perhaps not humanely – possible.

In the half-century before the Hills changed ufology forever, military psychiatrists had discovered that hypnosis was particularly effective for treating soldiers suffering from hysterical amnesia. Emilio Mira, another psychiatrist I dug up from the archives, was a Catalan doctor who fought on the losing Republican side in the Spanish Civil War. Writing in 1943 from exile in Buenos Aires (a city boasting more analysts per head of population than anywhere else on Earth, begging the question: how many thousands of neurotic *porteños* might in fact be alien abductees?), Mira's emphatic recommendation was that 'whenever a psychogenic repression is the cause of the amnesia the so-called cathartic methods of pressing interrogation under suggestion or mild hypnosis must be used.' If hypnosis worked so well during wartime, he would later suggest, there seemed no reason to prevent a well-meaning psychiatrist from using it during peacetime . . .

Meanwhile in the United States, as the war drew to a close Dr Benjamin Simon was preparing to do just this – but not before committing his work to celluloid in the service of his country.

In 1946 famed Hollywood director John Huston completed his third propaganda film for the US War Department, *Let There Be Light*. The war had been won, the great threat to freedom averted, but now came the greater effort to rehabilitate the thousands of US servicemen who bore the psychological scars earned on overseas battlefields. Set in Mason General Hospital, *Let There Be Light* was intended to reassure the American people of their government's commitment to its young soldiers, but John Wayne and the US Marines are nowhere to be seen in Huston's film. Instead, military psychiatry is the hero of this war movie.

But it seems that John Huston heard 'documentary' where the War Department asked for propaganda. There are few kindly doctors and smiling patients in Huston's film. What we see are young men in the throws of terrible affliction, and no amount of avuncular voice-over or judicious editing will hide it.

The War Department was not pleased. Huston's frank and unsentimental portrayal was deemed more likely to demoralise viewers than convince them that everything would be put right by the nice men in white coats. *Let There Be Light* was not publicly screened until 1981, by which time Huston was seventy-five years old.

Nonetheless, *Let There Be Light* would provide me with a vivid record of the hypnotic therapy Simon used to recover Barney and Betty Hill's missing time in 1963, and as a ufology-ologist it was my duty to trace this highly strange Nile back to its source.

I'd been working late among the fluorescent-lit aisles of the university library when I came across a reference confirming that Simon had appeared in *Let There Be Light*. Working quickly, I checked the catalogue:

Documentaries --
World War II --
Huston, John (dir.) --
Call number 940.54HIST.
Status: On-shelf

Gripped by a sudden irrational fear that the tape would be borrowed before I could get to it (surely that Indian student sitting quietly over there was writing a dissertation on the history of military medicine!), I ran – yes, in a library – to the shelves housing the audiovisual collection.

Bingo. There it was. I was in time. I punched the air in triumph as I stalked back to my carrel.

Watching Simon through the grainy custard fuzz of VHS felt like opening a forgotten tomb, only to find the Pharaoh alive and well, dressed in state and waiting to receive visitors. The printed word, after all, can only take the place of something no longer there, becoming the code of a lesser, overdetermined reality. Throughout my research I would sometimes experience a sense of vertigo; the black print would decouple from the page, the white space behind it (called 'air' in the publishing industry) acquiring depth to become an empty void, isotropic and endless . . . and yet I've never fallen so far as to stop reading.

On the other hand, I've never subscribed to that trite lie that a picture tells a thousand words – a thousand words can shine like a thousand suns if written properly. No, but a picture can tell you other things, such as the truth that in 1946 Dr Benjamin Simon could make veteran soldiers bend to his will with a single word. And also this suspicion: I think he enjoyed it.

His army uniform a size too small for his ample gut, Simon leads the traumatised soldier into the surgery. The soldier is very young.

'This man does not even remember his own name,' explains the narrator, voiced by Walter Huston, the director's father. 'A shell-burst in Okinawa wiped out his memory. The experience was unendurable to his conscious mind, which rejected it, and along with it his entire past. Through hypnotic regression the psychiatrist will attempt to help him.'

Simon runs the GI through a series of hypnotic induction exercises, which appear almost verbatim in Gustav Heyer's handbook fifteen years earlier. 'In themselves such experiments are often superfluous,' Heyer explains, 'but their value lies in the fact that by their means the patient becomes more and more pliable in our hands . . .'

If this sounds like a line from a bad Nazi-sploitation movie, things don't get much better in Huston's film. 'You're going into a deep, deep sleep,' Simon intones in his Boston Brahmin's voice, looking and sounding like an amateur magician with a taste for the suburban gothic. Watching this, I sense the touch of a theta-clear sadist who likes to be in charge.

'When I touch this hand my finger will be hot, you will not be able to bear it,' the doctor explains calmly. The expression of shock and pain on the soldier's face is palpable.

Next, Simon instructs – no, *orders* – the soldier's arm to become as stiff as a bar of steel. His right arm rises involuntarily. He has become a marionette, and Simon is pulling the invisible strings (and oops, wasn't that a *Heil Hitler* salute the GI just made?)

Finally we get to the main event. The trailers are over, the curtains draw back and the nightmare begins. Simon regresses him back steadily, ruthlessly, to the final barrage, the one shot too many that penetrated the soldier's psychic defences and tore open the breach through which the irresistible force of faceless, industrialised death broke like a tsunami over a harbour wall.

We've arrived at this particular GI's ground zero. He trembles uncontrollably, starting violently at the sounds of explosions only he can hear. Simon senses his closeness to the soldier's repressed trauma.

'You're going to remember it all,' Simon intones. 'You're going to remember about Okinawa. You're going to remember about the shells and the bombs, but they're gone.' Simon is issuing an order here, an edict on the soldier's reality – and if the real events were nothing like this, if in fact Simon's hypnosis manufactured a battlefield memory for the soldier to *explain* his amnesia rather than the other way around, then the soldier has no choice but to accept Simon's version of the story.

In 1963 Simon used the same induction exercises to put the Hills under hypnosis. Simon began (and I'm quoting here from Fuller again) by 'instructing that the patient's arm be stiff as a bar of steel (it remains so); testing for insensitivity to pain (when it is suggested, the patient does not react to the stimulus given); instructing the patient that the operator's finger will feel like a hot poker when it touches (the subject will pull his hand away in pain, even though the pain is only a suggestion).' But Barney and Betty were hardly soldiers.

They may not have been abducted by aliens either. But by accepting the principle that hypnotised subjects could not lie, which Simon himself had impressed upon them, by the end of their treatment the Hills had no choice but to *believe* they had been abducted. As Barney explained in his parting shot to the incensed psychotherapist (who was no doubt wishing by now that he'd been playing golf on the day he'd accepted Barney and Betty's case):

> Doctor, if I can draw an analogy, let's say that yesterday morning I drove down form Portsmouth to Boston to work. And if somehow, I had been told that this had not happened to me, I'd be bit curious. Particularly if this was said several months later, I would say, 'I'm not quite sure I drove that day,' but I'd get a calendar and check it. Then if this person kept insisting that I didn't drive there, in the face of knowing that I did, I would have to terminate the conversation and leave it at that. I'd reach the point where I'd say to myself, 'I cannot convince this person, and he cannot convince me. There's no issue. I can drop it.'

Who can say whether Simon's treatment actually healed, damaged or just plain confused them? My point is this: Barney and Betty Hill came out of hypnosis changed, emerging from therapy as strong and united as before, only now they inhabited a reality distinct from Simon's sceptical worldview. They had become the world's first alien abductees. This is a remarkable turn of events, and I wrack my brain for a similar incident in medical history, where the well-intentioned but questionable actions of a doctor resulted in the inadvertent creation of *an entire subculture*. I don't think there *is* another case like the Hills.

Over the years I've met a number of self-identified alien abductees. Most were struggling with the experience – I remember one softly spoken electrician from South Gippsland who confessed that he didn't want to remember his missing time but knew he had to face the truth eventually. Like so much in ufology, a close encounter with high strangeness needn't be objectively 'real' to have real and lasting consequences.

However, there are also many abductees who, as Barney and Betty Hill ultimately did, use their abduction experience as the foundation for a new sense of identity. The narrative retold in such accounts is a ufological version of the so-called Freudian family romance, first put forward in 1909 by the love-him-or-hate-him Viennese doctor, Sigmund Freud.

In the earliest stages of development, Freud argued, a child idolises its parents as the most powerful beings in its world, but as the child grows older it inevitably becomes aware of the human shortcomings of its parents. Unable to face the disillusionment, children indulge in fantasies that explain or compensate for their parents' deficiencies. Famously, Freud claimed that all children believe at one point in their lives that they were adopted. In these fantasies children replace their actual parents with their *real* parents. 'My *real* father is an explorer' or 'my *real* mother is a princess' are perennial favourites among the under-four sandpit set.

Among alien abductees, Freud's oh-so-bourgeois family romance is rewritten in some fairly bizarre ways. Parents come to believe their children are human-alien hybrids, wives identify their husbands as their extraterrestrial captors, and alien abduction is found to run in the family. (If you feel this has happened to you or someone close to you, *please* contact a counsellor or medical doctor before going to a hypnosis-happy ufologist – it would be a terrible mistake to uncover an alien abduction when you may just have a common garden case of the family romance.)

And then there was Elsa and her husband José, the friendly potters Priscilla Jane and I met in Oaxaca. Their story of alien abduction is remarkable for taking the family romance a step further, for they believe that aliens were responsible for *giving* them a family in the first place.

The day after Christmas, Priscilla Jane and I returned to the tiny Plaza de las Virgenes – a richly symbolic name, given the

tale we were about to hear. This time Elsa's husband José was with her, a mild-mannered *oaxaqueño* with gentle eyes and wavy black hair.

'Hey, it's so great you could come back!' Elsa exclaimed, spontaneously hugging us both. Chatting animatedly, we went to the café next door for chocolate, bringing back a steaming cup for José.

Back in the store, Priscilla Jane and I described our travels in Mexico to our new friends. After some gentle prodding from Priscilla Jane, I also explained my other purpose for being in the country. 'I'm collecting stories from UFO witnesses for my research,' I said as matter-of-factly as I could.

José and Elsa looked about as shocked as if I'd just produced a live alien from inside one of their ceramic vases. They exchanged a thunderstruck glance. 'You have got to be kidding me,' Elsa gasped. '*Es increíble*,' José agreed.

'You'd be surprised how often I get this reaction,' I said, attempting to make light of the situation, but Elsa and José were shaking their heads emphatically.

'No, no, you don't understand,' Elsa said. 'José and I, we've *seen* UFOs, here in Oaxaca. But that's not the only thing,' and now she looked to her husband, the uncertainty plain on her face. He gave a small nod.

'No,' José said decisively, 'that is not all. I might have been abducted, you see.' And they told us their story.

Elsa arrived in Mexico from Alaska in 1985, the same year of the disastrous Mexico City earthquake. Fleeing the devastation around the City, she had met José while travelling through Oaxaca. The two artists fell in love, and Elsa decided to make Oaxaca her new home.

The pair chose to live in the Sierra Norte, the range of mountains that loom so darkly over the ancient city. Long a

bastion of indigenous Zapotec and Mixtec culture, the Sierra Norte are noted for their thick pine forests and peculiar rock formations – and, more latterly, for sightings of brightly illuminated objects flashing through the night skies. Many of the strange lights seem to follow invisible lines connecting certain mountaintops and the ruins of Monte Albán. I should've seen the connection between UFO sightings and the sacred earth immediately, and yet Priscilla Jane and I were so enthralled by Elsa and José's story that neither of us thought to mention it.

From their mountain home Elsa and José had witnessed unusual aerial happenings themselves, but thought little about OVNIs at the time. 'It was just something you got used to living in the Sierra,' Elsa explained. 'The first time I saw an OVNI, sure, I was a little freaked out. But I didn't feel threatened, just, I don't know, *surprised* that this was actually happening to me.' Her eyes sparkled at the lustre of the memory. 'I didn't believe in OVNIs before, but here I was seeing the real thing zooming through the sky above my house! I remember I ran back inside to get José so he could tell me I wasn't hallucinating.'

But it was José's encounter with high strangeness that would have the most more far-reaching consequences. He'd gone outside one night to make a quick mobile phone call. 'The reception is better from the *mirador* near our house,' he explained. 'The view over the valley is very beautiful – in winter the air is so clear in the mountains, the stars do not seem so far away.'

'And have you seen OVNIs from the *mirador*?' I asked quietly, aware that José might need some gentle persuasion to continue his story.

'Ye-es,' he nodded, 'but not on *this* night of which I speak. I cannot be sure, because I do not remember what happened next.'

José made his phone call, but afterwards, as he stood among the dark pines moving in the cool air, he felt gripped by the

sensation that the passage of time had momentarily stopped . . . When he returned to the house José was disconcerted to find Elsa frantic with worry. He'd been gone for more than two hours.

Soon afterwards José began having vivid dreams of strangely non-human (but not inhuman) beings who emanated an aura of kindly curiosity. 'Something is going to happen,' Elsa told him. She was right – not long after José's experience of missing time, Elsa discovered she was pregnant.

The pair smiled at us expectantly, José's earlier embarrassment now evaporated. Priscilla Jane, who was experiencing something akin to deep ontological shock, sought clarification.

'Are you saying the aliens helped you get *pregnant*?' she asked, bravely managing to hide her incredulity.

José and Elsa beamed radiantly at each other. 'We honestly don't know,' Elsa said. 'All I can say is that before José lost those two hours up in the mountains we couldn't have kids, and we'd tried so many times . . . but afterwards,' she continued, her voice quavering with emotion, 'we could. I can't explain it, and I'm not sure whether to believe *they* had anything to do with it, but there it is.'

'And you won't undergo hypnosis to find out what happened in those two hours?' I asked José.

He shook his head firmly. 'No. I don't need to know. This is not a mystery for me. I'm just happy with how things turned out.'

Neither Elsa nor José had a definitive answer for their experiences. Thankfully, they didn't expect me to supply them with one, either.

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SOUTHERN MEXICO
THE HUASTECA
GULF OF MEXICO
Cancún
Mérida
YUCATÁN
México City
Popocatépetl
"el D.F."
Tepoztlán
Veracruz
Cempoaltepetl
Acapulco
Oaxaca
BELIZE
GUATEMALA
HONDURAS
EL SALVADOR
PACIFIC OCEAN
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OAXACA:
TOWARDS A MESTIZO UFOLOGY

After the carnivalesque atmosphere that ruled the streets on Christmas Eve, Oaxaca quietened down for the rest of the holiday. The city became positively mellow and relaxed, which seemed at odds with the usually clamorous urban experience that Priscilla Jane and I had grown accustomed to in Mexico. Unbelievably, even the roaming mariachi bands, those guitar-strumming banes of plazas, streetside restaurants and any public transport vehicle larger than a taxi, were taking a vacation, it seemed.

We decided to stay a while longer in Oaxaca so that I could make the acquaintance of a shaman. Immediately after recounting their story of alien abduction with its unusually happy ending, Elsa and José insisted I meet a friend of theirs, a local shaman with the mellifluous name of Alejandro Rosas. I have to confess to reacting a little sceptically at first.

'What kind of shaman is he?' I asked.

They looked confused. 'How do you mean?' asked Elsa.

What I meant was, 'What would a shaman know about UFOs?' but I didn't want to insult our new friends, and so I said instead, 'Well, what kind of magic is he into, you know, "white" or "black"?'

Elsa laughed at the suggestion. 'Oh, Alejandro is definitely a good shaman!' she exclaimed. 'I would say he's more of a *curandero* – a medicine man, I guess. I don't know if he thinks of his work as magic, either. Alejandro is quite a modern guy, you know.'

José nodded in agreement. 'Alejandro has many stories about OVNIs from the mountains,' he added. 'I think you will like each other.'

Later that afternoon Priscilla Jane and I sat on a bench in Oaxaca's zócalo, a peaceful square framed by a grove of giant umbrella-like fig trees that didn't quite shield from view the head-achingly detailed façade of the city cathedral. Scores of families were strolling about the plaza, the parents enjoying the bright winter sunshine while their children engaged in a most singularly peculiar activity.

Knots of squealing boys and girls were playing with huge, cigar-shaped balloons, easily ten feet or more in length. If you consider that a standard-issue Mexican toddler is about three feet tall, the visual effect of a gaggle of over-excited children swinging about these objects was as if a small army of giant exclamation marks was marching in the plaza.

Shrieking with delight, one small boy in Superman pyjamas launched his balloon into the air, to be joined a moment later by a veritable armada of floating aerial objects as other children followed suit. I jumped to my feet in surprise.

'Hey!' I said to Priscilla Jane. 'Those balloons look just like UFOs!' She looked at me quizzically.

Against the clear backdrop of the sky, the balloons resembled nothing more than the classic cigar-shaped 'fusiform' UFO beloved of nuts-and-bolts ufologists. Watching the cylindrical objects suspended lazily in the mild mountain air, I couldn't help myself and pulled the camera out from my daypack, snapping a

few shots of the giant balloons hovering over the cathedral. I've never seen a UFO and don't expect to, but this was the next best thing to having my very own UFO photo. I grinned with foolish pleasure while Priscilla Jane looked over the pictures in the viewfinder of the camera. 'They do look a bit like UFOs,' she was forced to admit.

The original title of Erich von Däniken's first groundbreaking book ('groundbreaking' in that its foundations were cracked) was *Memories of the Future*. Despite sounding like the debut album of a late '60s psychedelic band (and I do wonder what Erich had spinning on the record player while he penned *Chariots of the Gods?* in the hotel in Switzerland), the original title says so much more about the real purpose of ancient astronaut theories than its clumsy English translation, which refers only to the past – and the past belongs to the departed extraterrestrials who so casually, perhaps even accidentally, sowed the seeds of civilisation upon Earth. The secret to understanding the popularity of ancient astronaut theories is that their real preoccupation lies not with ancient history, but with the future.

Imagine a police line-up of the usual ufological suspects (the charges could be for crimes against credulity). On the left stands the nuts-and-bolts ufologist, dressed for the occasion in an engineer's hardhat; nevertheless an unkempt sourness hangs about the stooped figure, acquired from too many nights exposed to the elements, watching the skies for the Big One. Nuts-and-bolts has an accomplice, a sallow-faced conspiracy theorist who mutters ceaselessly about Oprah Winfrey and fluoride and Pentagon cover-ups.

Next along are the contactees, a dreamy-looking couple in matching white robes and golden sunburst medallions. At the

other end of the line-up an abductee huddles in terror, waiting for the moment when the walls dissolve and the aliens arrive to take everyone away for yet another anal probing.

But there is one more suspect. A middle-aged white male, he wears a tweed jacket with leather elbow patches and is chewing a foul-smelling pipe which fills the station with thick smoke, much to the other occupants' irritation. 'Ya can't smoke in here, punk,' barks a hard-faced cop who is dying for a cigarette himself. 'The law says so, and now I'm telling ya.' The ancient astronaut theorist affects not to hear. 'Look here, Detective,' he says, pulling on the pipe. 'Let's be reasonable, shall we? I'm not like these other charlatans. I'm a humanist. My faith lies in science and mankind, not the unseen workings of a non-existent god. But in answer to your question: Yes, Jesus *was* an astronaut.' Of all these misfits and megalomaniacs, he is by far the most deluded.

Ancient astronaut theories naturalise human history. They say that there is only one path forward, that cultures must pass through successive phases of progress or be left behind – an idea that, as we've seen, was taken from cultural diffusionism. But the original cultural diffusionists only ever looked backwards to the ultimate source of civilisation. Ancient astronaut theories do what cultural diffusionism didn't dare: they look ahead to the ultimate destiny of humans.

When ancient astronaut theorists talk about 'memories of the future,' they are not anticipating the future in an idly speculative, I-wonder-what-life-will-be-like-in-the-year-2056 kind of way. For the true believers, ancient astronaut theories are prophecies, the blueprints for the next logical and *necessary* step in history: for humans to travel, as the 'gods' once did, to other planets.

If this sounds like the kind of bombastic hubris that led to centuries of colonialism on Earth, it's because that's exactly what it is, just transferred to a new frontier. Followers of the ancient

astronaut credo dream of nothing less than *galactic conquest*. As von Däniken insists, 'The shrewdest, most die-hard individualist must see that the whole human task consists in colonising the universe and that man's whole spiritual duty lies in perpetuating all his efforts and practical experience.'

In the 1960s Robert Temple was a student at the University of Pennsylvania. Fascinated by the myths and legends of the ancient world, he stumbled across what he thought was a startling discovery. The Dogon, an agrarian people who lived in the West African nation of Mali, appeared to have incredibly accurate knowledge of the binary star system of Sirius, a.k.a. the Dog Star, the brightest star in the night sky. Temple was intrigued and began making his own investigations, which were eventually published in 1976 as the bestselling book *The Sirius Mystery*.

Despite being invisible to the naked eye, the Dogon considered Sirius B, the smaller, white dwarf companion star of Sirius A, to be the most important star in the sky. Western astronomers didn't discover Sirius B until 1862, and then only with the aid of powerful new telescopes. The Dogon, who did not have telescopes, also appeared to know that the much brighter Sirius A orbited around its smaller but enormously more massive companion.

Temple was astounded. Although the Dogon's myths about Sirius were not mysterious to the Dogon themselves, the pebble in the tennis shoe of history (according to Temple) was this: how could the Dogon, a supposedly savage tribe straight out of *King Solomon's Mines*, know so much about something that had eluded Western science for so long? (It should be said that Temple drew most of his research from the work of two French anthropologists, Marcel Griaule and Germaine Dieterlen, who had lived among the Dogon for many years. Their rather more phlegmatic explanation was that the Dogon's legends spoke in metaphor and allegory and therefore did not describe actual astronomical conditions.)

Temple's answer was to introduce ancient astronauts into the picture. Some time during the Neolithic, he argued, amphibious extraterrestrials from a watery planet orbiting Sirius (dubbed 'Nommos' by Temple after a fish-tailed god in the Dogon pantheon) made contact with primitive humans in ancient Sumeria, kick-starting the first human civilisation. Unable to comprehend the Nommos' space-age technology, the Sumerians venerated them as gods. After the Nommos departed for their homeworld, a garbled account of alien contact spread from Sumer as civilisation diffused across Egypt, Greece and North Africa, finally coming to rest among the Dogon, its original meaning now well and truly lost.

In this highly strange revisionist version of history, although *they* believe it's *their* mythology, it's as if the Dogon have been duped by History. Their creation myths turn out not to be theirs at all, but belong instead to humanity's common extraterrestrial heritage. But what stands out to me about *The Sirius Mystery* is the ease with which cultural diffusionism is lifted so effortlessly out of the distant past and projected into the future. The more important lesson to be learnt from the Dogon was not that aliens were the ultimate source of human civilisation, but rather that our civilisation was finally able to recognise that it stood on the verge of its own watershed, which Temple called 'take-off point'. '"Take-off point" is probably a universal phenomenon,' he writes.

> Once intelligent societies reach take-off point, they rush so quickly up in technological competence that a comparison between them and non-technological societies is absurd. The intelligent societies existing in the universe, then, are going to be of two kinds: less advanced than ourselves, 'primitive'; and fantastically more advanced than ourselves, 'magical.' To be at the point where we are now, at the watershed between

> 'primitive' and 'magical,' is such a rare event in the universal history that we may be the only intelligent society in the entire galaxy which is at this moment experiencing such a stage of our evolution. We therefore should feel privileged to be witnesses of it.

To be witnesses of *ourselves* as we make the leap into space, I think Temple means. In the gee-whiz space age years of the '60s and '70s when ancient astronaut theorists were having their extraterrestrial epiphany, the Earth-bound culture that looked set to take the leap into space and become 'gods' themselves was none other than the West (and I include the Soviets here as the ideological heirs of Marx and Engels, two of the most influential Western philosophers of the nineteenth century). Not so much dwarfs standing on the shoulders of giants, than a great beast trampling over those who'd gone before.

And what comes after the inevitable touchdown in a cloud of dust and flame? One day in the future, light-years away from Earth, furry/scaled/slimy beings will cower in fear and awe at the arrival of we humans in our own UFOs, and history will be brought full circle. This is the point of remembering the future; as the man in the safari jacket, Erich von Däniken, tells it:

> We know that our ingenuous and primitive forefathers did not know what to make of the astronauts' superior technology. They worshipped the astronauts as 'gods' who came from other stars and the astronauts had no other choice but patiently to accept their adoration as divinities – a homage, incidentally, for which our astronauts on unknown planets must be quite prepared.

The gods must be crazy, I agree – but the only ones crazier are those who want to become gods themselves.

After some halting phone conversations I managed to set up a meeting with Alejandro Rosas, the shaman.

We agreed to meet at the same café in the Plaza de las Virgenes where Priscilla Jane and I first met Elsa after being turned away on Christmas Eve by the mezcal-drinking, machete-wielding hotelier. When he arrived, Alejandro proved to be a tall, striking man who wore the beard and flowing hair of a Hindu holy man but possessed the sparkling eyes and love of conversation characteristic of many Mexicans. Around his neck he wore a cloth pouch that held images of the Virgin and various patron saints.

'My name is Alejandro,' he told me, 'but my friends call me "El Alebrije."' *Alebrijes* are a Mexican folk-art, brightly painted little wooden monsters in the shape of dragons or dinosaurs or other strange combinations of real animals. I decided I liked this shaman.

Over coffee and *tlayudas* (enormous white corn tortillas stuffed with *frijoles*, tomatoes and avocado), Alejandro explained how he'd become a curandero. 'My family is from the Huasteca, on the Gulf coast,' he told me. 'In the Huasteca a curandero is someone of importance, not like the cheap *brujos* you find in the cities who tell your fortune for thirty pesos. My grandmother was a curandera and everyone who knew her knew she was wise and kind.

'When I was young I would follow my *abuela* into the forest and the fields and help her collect herbs, flowers, seeds. I learnt at first by watching, but when she saw that I had the same spirit inside me as she did, my *abuela* began teaching me her wisdom. Now *I* teach others – but I am still learning, and will continue learning until the day I die, *gracias a todos los santos*,' and so saying he kissed the cloth pouch that hung about his neck.

In the years since leaving the Huasteca, Alejandro had studied the teachings of Eastern meditation and Western therapeutic traditions, incorporating the insights of other cultures into his practice; for this reason he called himself a 'psychoshaman' as well as a curandero. It's what was written on his business card, at least.

We began talking about UFOs. 'I've never seen an OVNI myself,' Alejandro admitted, laying his broad, brown hands flat on the table. Nonetheless, the charismatic shaman proved to be a veritable magical mountain of information on UFOs in Mexico. 'Until the 1970s OVNI sightings weren't so big in Mexico,' he began. 'But now OVNIs are everywhere. Around Oaxaca I have heard so many stories I am no longer surprised.'

I described how many of the stories I'd heard linked UFO sightings to particular mountains, rock formations or ancient ruins scattered across the countryside.

'Yes, this is true,' Alejandro agreed, nodding. 'And this is no chance happening. These places you talk of have always had spiritual significance for the traditional people. It makes sense that the OVNIs would be drawn to these places too.'

'But do you think that the people believe the OVNIs are spirit beings, rather than alien spacecraft?' I asked.

Alejandro smiled broadly. 'Yes. And no, also. Let me try to explain. In Spain, there were legends of *los duendes*. Have you heard of *los duendes*?'

I shook my head. The word was unfamiliar to me.

'How can I say what *los duendes* are? This is so frustrating. Sorry, *my English is not good*,' Alejandro said, breaking into heavily accented English. 'Duendes are magical people who live in the forest, inside trees, by the water,' he tried again. 'Not tall, but very hairy.'

'*Dwarfs*?' I suggested. 'I think they might be called *dwarfs* in English.'

The shaman was as unfamiliar with the English term as I with the Spanish. '*Se puede ser*,' he said with uncertainty. 'Maybe that's it, *du-wharfs*,' he agreed, but I could tell he was only saying it to be courteous. I later looked up 'duendes' in a Spanish-English dictionary and found that the word did indeed translate loosely as *dwarf*, or better still *faerie*, with the connotations of otherworldly beings who could be unpredictably benevolent or malevolent.

'In Mexico, there were no duendes when the Spanish arrived,' Alejandro continued after sipping from his coffee. 'In Mexico, there were gods and spirits and other supernatural beings. So many gods, the Aztecs had! After the Conquest these old gods were called devils by the priests, and were banished to hell. But not all of them disappeared – the people could not leave behind their ancient beliefs so easily, no? Some of the old gods *changed* instead. They became smaller, less terrible, but still they controlled the soil, the crops, the rain. These old gods became elemental beings, *los duendes*, and the people prayed to them for good harvests and long lives.

'Listen: in Mexico City and the state of Morelos, the shaman prays to *los tlaloques*, spirit creatures of the air and the rain. This was the heart of the Aztec Empire, and the Aztec god of rains and *la fertilidad* was called Tlaloc. The Spanish priests cast out Tlaloc because they believed he was a demon; and he *was* a bloodthirsty god, his statue in Tenochtitlán wore a cloak of human skin. But Tlaloc's helper spirits survived their master's fall and became the tlaloques. Today the shaman climbs to the mountaintop to make his offerings to the tlaloques for good rains, for they will only listen to the shaman in these high places.'

I listened with fascination. Warming to his material (and perhaps relieved that he wasn't being asked to translate into English), Alejandro continued with enthusiasm.

'Everywhere in Mexico there are survivors of the old religions,' he said, and I have no doubt that this was his actual belief, rather than an anthropological observation. 'Where I am from, in the Huasteca, they are called *chaneques*. Here, in Oaxaca, we have *vinigulazas*. In the Yucatán it is *aluxes*. These are all duendes, earth and water spirits from the old religions of this country.

'Now, I am a curandero – a healer. But in Mexico there are other wise people. Like the *nagual*, who changes shape into an animal. Or the brujo, who will curse your enemy or talk to Santa Muerte – that is *Holy Death*,' (he said in English). 'Santa Muerte is the patron saint of gangsters, you know. I am not a brujo, but I keep La Muerte close to me, for one day Death will be my companion too.' At the mention of Santa Muerte the shaman kissed the little cloth bag of saints around his neck a second time.

'*Bueno*. Out in the villages, the *granícero* is the most powerful wise person. He is a good Catholic – he prays to the Virgin and the saints – but he is also a weatherman, a rain doctor who prays to the duendes to make the crops to grow.

'But listen: there are wise people pray to the *new* duendes. Some graniceros climb into the mountains to speak with the OVNIs instead of the rain spirits. They say the OVNIs are more powerful allies than the duendes.'

'So, do these shamans believe that the OVNIs possess supernatural powers?' I asked.

Alejandro nodded. 'Exactly.' He looked down at his plate and the last piece of *tlayuda*, as if in surprise that it was still there. 'I forget how big a *tlayuda* is!' he exclaimed, before devouring the tasty morsel with relish.

I took the moment to ask another question, one that I hoped pre-empted what the shaman would say next. 'In other countries people believe that the ancient gods were aliens mistaken for gods by primitive peoples,' I said, bringing the concept of ancient

astronauts into the conversation. 'Do you think it's possible that the duendes were actually extraterrestrials?'

Alejandro shook his head, holding up his hands as if to say *slow down*. 'It is much more complicated than that,' he said, once his mouth was no longer full. 'For many of the traditional people that I work with, OVNIs are extraterrestrial *and* supernatural. I will tell you another story.

'Two days to the east of here live the Mixe. The Mixe are a proud people; they boast they have never been conquered. The Zapotecs and Aztecs tried and failed, and when Cortés arrived with his horses and guns and steel they pushed him back as well. In the end it was the priests who won over the Mixe – but,' and Alejandro's eyes twinkled with mischief, 'not even *el Papa* could defeat the Mixe spirit.

'All Mixe people have two names – one true name from the old religion, and one Spanish name given when they are baptised in church. They believe that every person is born with two souls, a human soul and an animal soul that lives in a beast in the wilderness. Two bodies – one soul. This is not Catholicism, not the way the *sacerdotes* teach it!

'The Mixe say they did not come from Mexico originally, but arrived here in giant boats from across the sea. They journeyed for many years in the new land until their great king, Condoy, gazed upon the holy mountain Cempoaltepetl, which means "Twenty Heads." El Rey Condoy said, "This will be our place."

'Some say El Rey Condoy was not human, but born of a great stone egg. Others say it was God who raised El Rey Condoy from the sacred rock of Cempoaltepetl to become the father of his people. When El Rey Condoy died he didn't really die, but returned to Cempoaltepetl to hide himself inside the mountain, waiting to return to his people.' Each time Alejandro repeated the legendary king's name he said it louder, more forcefully, like

a mantra, drawing up the lost history of his country as from a deep well, drawing it piece by piece into the present. The shaman leant over his coffee to speak in a voice that had become low and urgent, scarcely aware of his own words.

'Today the *graniceros* pray for El Rey Condoy's blessing – but they pray to other powers on Cempoaltepetl, also. Listen: there are some who believe that the OVNIs fly over the sacred mountain to pay tribute to the king. They say El Rey Condoy himself came to the Mixe from inside an OVNI.'

We looked at each other for a moment, the psychoshaman and I, before breaking into peals of laughter. We rocked back in our seats, slapped our thighs, and wiped tears from our eyes. For me, this was not the laughter of derision, but rather an outpouring of sheer pleasure that incredible stories still existed. Why Alejandro also laughed, I can't say. But of one thing I was certain: the curandero was the kind of man who read the mood of a time, a place and a person better than most.

'It's all a mix here, in Mexico,' Alejandro said after a moment, using the Spanish word *mezcla* for 'mix.' 'The OVNIs heed the call of the graniceros – but is it because the aliens are really duendes, or because the power of the shaman is so great they can control extraterrestrial beings? *Quién sabe!*'

'Can *you* summon OVNIs?' I asked, joking this time. Alejandro shook his head sadly. 'If I could, I would be working for NASA, no?'

I had one last question of the shaman. 'I've heard tell here in Mexico – and right across South America too – that UFOs are often seen near "special" rocks, or near the ruins of old temples and sacred places. Why is this?' Alejandro wrinkled his brow in thought for a moment.

'Rocks are a symbol of stability in traditional American cultures,' he replied. 'The Earth is a deep source of power, a great goddess who gives life to the people but in the end always

takes it back again. Rocks, mountains, these are remembrances of her embrace.

'Do you believe this? Do not tell me. But maybe you can see this: for these peoples rocks are symbols of the unchanging cycle of life and death, of the great Earth spinning beneath us. And symbols are very powerful things. The people see OVNIs near rocks of ancient power because the OVNIs have become symbols of this same power, I think.'

During my meeting with the shaman Priscilla Jane had been wandering the nearby artisan market, but she now arrived at the café with a multitude of canvas bags spilling over with colourful woollen *rebozos*, embroidered cotton *camisas*, and the wooden monsters called *alebrijes*, from which Alejandro took his pseudonym.

Alejandro rose to his feet at her entrance, smiling winningly. '*Señor Rosas, te presento mi novia, Priscilla Jane* – she is a librarian,' I said with pride, making the introduction with due formality. 'And this is Alejandro,' I continued, turning to Priscilla Jane. 'He's a psychoshaman.'

'*Encantada*,' Alejandro murmured, before switching bravely to English. 'It is a pleasure to meet you, miss.' Priscilla Jane blushed deeply. '*Hola, señor*,' she managed to say.

The curandero looked at the two of us, his grin becoming broader. He touched the pouch around his neck. 'The saints,' he said in Spanish, 'bless you both.' Then, after a cunning pause, he said, 'And the OVNIs bless you also.'

Since leaving Oaxaca I've thought a lot about what Alejandro 'El Alebrije' Rosas, curandero and psychoshaman of the Huasteca, had to say about UFOs in Mexico.

UFOs seemed to be everywhere in this country. We'd heard stories from people living in the urban, cosmopolitan milieu of Mexico City, like that told by Ricardo the driver. These accounts were familiar to me, sounding more like the bewildering and oftentimes frightening encounters reported by people from all around the world.

But in the more isolated and indigenous communities we travelled to, in places like Tepoztlán and Oaxaca, UFOs had clearly been adopted without hesitation into existing folk beliefs. These UFOs were no longer the disturbing presences described in tales of high strangeness. Sometimes, it seemed, they could even be prevailed upon to aid humans, as in the stories Alejandro told me of shamans offering up prayers to the unidentifiable objects for good rains or bountiful crops.

Alejandro had given me a clue when he described UFO beliefs among the mountain peoples of Mexico as a *mezcla*, a mix of ideas – an innocuous enough word, but one that in Latin America is charged with towering significance, as it forms the linguistic root for that most bitterly contested of racial, social and historical terms, *mestizo*.

Mestizo originally referred to a person of mixed indigenous and European background. Legend has it that the first mestizo was Martín Cortés, son of Hernán Cortés and Doña Marina, also known as La Malinche, the indigenous woman who was the Spanish captain's interpreter (and lover, obviously) during the conquest of the Aztecs. When the Iberian kingdoms of Spain and Portugal still ruled the continent, colonial society was heavily stratified. *Criollos*, or people of predominantly European descent, were usually at the top, *indígenos* and slaves (who were usually of African ancestry) were stuck at the bottom, while mestizos were left to fare as best they could in the uncomfortable and unloved middle. Independence in the nineteenth century did little to

alter the situation – come to think of it, most Latin American people will tell you things are pretty much the same today, but that's the weight of centuries for you.

Since the Mexican Revolution, however, which lasted from 1910 until about 1920 and saw close to two million Mexicans die but was nevertheless the catalyst for some of the first effective social reforms since independence, the term mestizo has taken on more positive connotations. The reinvigorated concept of mestizo came to mean a melding of the best parts of European, African and indigenous cultures to make a new society, vital and hitherto unseen in the world. Modern Mexico, like so many other Latin American nations, was itself largely the creation of mestizo processes working across the centuries.

When I think about the ufology Priscilla Jane and I encountered in Mexico, I see how strongly it differed from the beliefs and fantasies of other types of ufology: nuts-and-bolts ufology, with its wounded sense of entitlement and alternate histories of the Cold War; the contactees, spreading their message of cosmic peace; the abductees, preoccupied with their harrowing journey into missing time; and, most strikingly, ancient astronaut theories. What we saw in Mexico, and what I encountered in my earlier travels in Chile, Bolivia and Peru, was a folk ufology that drew upon pre-Hispanic legends (El Rey Condoy, the Diaguita rock carvings, Marcahuasi), Catholic imagery (the La Conchita shrine in Tepoztlán, the prayers of graniceros, the space brothers' spring in Cochiguaz) and modern ufology in the attempt to make sense of UFO sightings.

In the resulting fusion, what I like to think of as a mestizo ufology is emerging. I see mestizo ufology as counterpoint to the ancient astronaut hypothesis, which, based on concepts taken from cultural diffusionism, views history as a race to the finish line between competing civilisations. In such encounters there

can only be one winner, one true victor for whom the ultimate spoil is control of both humanity's past and future.

Mestizo ufology explains history differently. Take the Pyramid of the Tepozteco in Tepoztlán. It seems almost unbelievable that the pyramid was built on the edge of such impossibly high cliffs – merely climbing up to the pyramid is hard enough, I can't imagine carrying up the tonnes of stone and tools needed to build the thing. Moreover, UFOs are frequently seen hovering around it. Clearly the extraterrestrials have come to admire their handiwork, the ancient astronaut hypothesis might say.

But the way mestizo ufology sees things, UFOs aren't needed to explain the Tepozteco pyramid. Instead, OVNIs come to Tepoztlán for the same reason ancient Mexicans built the pyramid in the first place: to access the already existing power of the place. It is not the Tepozteco pyramid itself, but rather the rocks on which it was built – as it is for the 'portal stone' in Cochiguaz, the great dome of El Fuerte de Samaipata, the stone faces of Marcahuasi and the ruined citadel of Monte Alban – that are part of an alien, unknown reality (or at least a conduit leading to it) that exists alongside the everyday world.

The past may yet be extraterrestrial – personally, I can't say either way. But unlike ancient astronaut theories, for mestizo ufology the prehistoric moment of contact with high strangeness was not forgotten *because it is still happening*. This, I think, is where the power of the untouchable real has been channelled: into a highly strange renaissance of ancient beliefs whose echoes are still heard today.

And yet the crowning irony is that, undeniably, ufology *was* culturally diffused into Latin America from the United States, starting with the worldwide 'saucer mania' that followed Kenneth Arnold's first sighting in 1947. But once OVNIs were embedded in the deeper symbolic life of Latin America, these little bits

of nothing were reworked into existing systems of magical and religious knowledge to create those special places scattered across the continent that, even today, glow with the otherworldly light of high strangeness.

15

THE ANSWERS:
WHY I HAVE NONE

In 1986 Halley's Comet made its closest approach to the Earth in its 76-year orbit of the Sun. Nerds around the planet rejoiced at the news, and though I was only eleven at the time I was one of them. Even then I was aware that I belonged to a privileged generation, old enough to understand how amazing this cosmic event was and yet just young enough to have an outside chance of seeing the comet come around again in 2062 (if I'm still alive then I'll be nearly ninety – so not a *good* second chance, admittedly).

For my father, however, it would be his one and only opportunity. I remember his excitement as he drove our family – myself, my sister and our mother – up to an open patch of bushland near where we lived on the outskirts of Melbourne. In the boot of the car was a carefully wrapped brand new telescope, bought for the express purpose of seeing the comet. It must've been a bumper year for telescope manufacturers, in the same way 1945 was for contraceptive makers.

My father settled upon a piece of land that had been partially cleared for a new housing estate. We were alone on the crest of a low hill with an unimpeded view of the sky; there were no

homes or streetlights within at least three or four kilometres, and I remember it had just rained. The gentle night air felt chill on my unprotected face and hands.

I watched my father set up the telescope in silence. I like to think he was smoking a cigarette as he screwed the barrel firmly into place, but this can't be true, as I'm sure he'd already quit when I was much younger than this.

The Australian bush can be a disconcerting place at night. There's something in the way the sickle-shaped leaves of the eucalyptus tree reflect shifting moonlight that I believe no other vegetation can. But I felt only excitement, the thrill of staying up late on a school night – eclipsed only by the anticipation that soon I would be seeing a *visitor from outer space!* (as one book I'd read described the comet). The fact that none of us could see Halley's Comet with the naked eye should have signalled a warning, and perhaps it did, but the calibrating presence of the telescope banished all such doubts.

Following the instructions printed in a local newspaper, my father aimed the telescope at the correct position in the heavens. He peered down the eyepiece, adjusted the elevation, took another look. A slight frown creased his forehead. If he was smoking a cigarette, this is when he would've crushed it out under his heel.

'Well, there you go,' he announced after a moment, trying to hide the disappointment in his voice. 'That must be it. Who wants to see the famous Halley's Comet?'

When my turn came I had to stand on a milk crate (thoughtfully packed by my parents) to reach the telescope. I screwed one eye shut and with the other looked into the eyepiece. I had already seen plenty of old black and white photos of the comet from the books I'd read in preparation for this event, but this

wasn't it. Where was the comet, and what was that big fuzzy cloud doing there in the middle of the view?

My father sighed. 'That *is* Halley's Comet,' he explained.

The generation of '86 was right out of luck. On this approach Halley's Comet and the Earth were on opposite sides of the Sun, meaning that the Comet would only be visible during its headlong dive towards the Sun, when its spectacular phoenix tail of ionised dust and ice particles stretched out for millions of kilometres *behind* it. From our terrestrial perspective the comet would appear foreshortened, collapsed into a blurry obloid rather than the screaming streak across the sky it had been in 1910.

I felt my father's disappointment more keenly than my own, I think. But as I went to get down from the telescope I accidentally knocked the smirking contraption, causing Halley's Comet to jump abruptly out of the picture. What replaced it was a field of stars, but it was quite unlike anything I'd ever seen when I'd simply looked up into the night sky. My vision was filled by a multitude of shining points, and I imagined I could see further still into the depths beyond them. Suddenly I was looking *down* into a well of space, not up, and rather than induce vertigo the sensation amazed me.

Some fifteen years later when I was at university I was startled to read Thomas de Quincey's similar (but rather more poetic) reaction to looking through a telescope for the first time. It was 1846, and the famous opium addict and writer – I like to think of him as the Hunter S. Thompson of Victorian England – had been invited by the astronomer Lord Rosse to observe the newly discovered Orion's Nebula through Rosse's state-of-the-art telescope.

A man of finely attuned physical and intellectual sensibilities, de Quincey was terrified by what he saw. 'Had Milton's "incestuous mother" with her fleshless son,' he wrote:

> and with the warrior angel, his father, that led the rebellions of heaven, been suddenly unmasked by Lord Rosse's instrument, in these dreadful distances before which, simply as expressions of resistance, the mind of man shudders and recoils, there would have been nothing more appalling in the exposure.

But unlike de Quincey, I felt no fear gazing through the telescope on that chill Melbourne night twenty-five years ago. The blazing star-field in the eyepiece was nothing like the constellation charts I'd pored over. No zodiacal guardians emerged from the patternless depths, no lines or coordinates existed to orient myself in this new and trackless arena. I thought back to the first UFO book I had read, the one my parents brought me in the hospital. *Every one of these bright stars might shelter other worlds.* How could I not feel elation in the knowledge that this shining field of possibility existed, without me, beyond me, even if I would never know its secrets?

I'm thinking of retiring from the field of ufology-ology after I finish writing this book. As a cultural historian it seems the only responsible thing to do – after all, here I am at the end of the journey, laptop powered down and library doors closed, and the only conclusion I can offer in full confidence is that, when it comes to UFOs, *I have no answers.* And I don't just mean, there's no easy answers to UFOs. I mean: there are none. But I did warn you from the start, so if this angers you, *stop reading now!*

On the upside (for ufologists, at least), UFOs as we understand them not to exist have been around for sixty years and counting, and unless real aliens are discovered soon or the human race peters out before it can prove otherwise, ufology isn't going to disappear any time soon. And yet, in the decades since Kenneth

Arnold's first flying saucers skimmed fast and low over the Cascade Range, ufology lingers on the fringe of accepted scientific beliefs, remaining the fallow province of cranks, conspiracists, dreamers and witnesses. Let's face it, despite ufology's enormous output – surely it must be one of the longest-lived and most popular alternative cultural movements of the last century – it's as far from proving the existence of UFOs as it has ever been.

As you know, I have been ever so careful *not* to suggest that UFOs exist in some material, scientifically knowable sense, for that is ufology's self-appointed task, not mine. This book is no apologia for the belief in UFOs, because frankly I do not believe in them. But I can't bring myself to take a chauvinistically sceptical stance either. Instead, I have laboured under the conviction that the fascination with UFOs can be better understood if questions of belief and disbelief are suspended, as the first brings us too close to falling into the world of high strangeness and the second keeps us too far away. I chose to thread a narrow path through the two positions, and that is why even now, as the final pages are turned, I firmly and resolutely withhold from making any truth claims about UFOs.

For me, ufology – even the hoaxes and frauds – is all about the attempt to tell real stories. In all its myriad forms, ufology searches for an authentic, more real story than those told by science, religion, government or anybody with a claim on what passes for reality. Some of ufology's stories eagerly assert their allegiance to the status quo of power and authority in our world; others contest it bitterly. Some do both at the same time.

The one thing that unifies all ufology is the transformative moment of contact with something that does not fit into the world as we would like to understand it. This, then, is the trick to thinking about UFOs without falling into belief or scepticism.

UFOs barely exist, because right from the start we identify them as unidentified. UFOs always exist elsewhere, beyond planet Earth, beyond science, beyond human capacity to imagine the truly alien. Wherever you look for them, UFOs are fleeting objects. They hold together ufological theories and stories without fully appearing in them. As long as there exist scientific anomalies or secret government programs or encounters that challenge a witness's hold on reality, ufology will continue its search. But ufology's fatal fascination with high strangeness also guarantees its incompleteness, for ufologists will *never* catch their objects, because there were none to begin with.

And yet it always comes back to this: you either believe in UFOs or you don't. If you're a believer, then there's everything to be learnt from ufology – the origins of Earth, the existence of intelligent life in the Universe, the universal source of spirituality, what the world's governments are really spending our tax dollars on, and so on.

But for those who don't believe, as I don't, what's left?

If you're of an anthropological bent, ufology can be one hell of a journey through the hidden valleys and tangled woods of human belief. At the very least, this is what I set out to do in this book, to be your guide to places that exist in this world even as they belong to another, places that straddle the boundary between the normal world and the unknown regions of high strangeness.

But that's not quite enough for me either. I'm not satisfied with just an armchair travel guide to the parallel world of ufology. For me there is *something* compelling and unique about ufology that warranted so many years of my life dedicated to understanding it – and so it shall be here, in the final pages of this book, that I declare openly that while I'm not for ufology and never will be, I am against blind scepticism.

True sceptics – and I don't mean merely people who think through things rationally – are on the side of the symbolic, the picture of the world as it stands now. True sceptics worship the unchanging face of the symbolic. It is their god, it provides the answers to all their questions. There are no gaps in the symbolic, no holes, and nothing behind it. Perhaps we can't see all of it now, but in time it will become visible to us.

For true sceptics there's no place in the symbolic for high strangeness. UFOs are either random bricks in the wall that ufologists mistakenly believe form meaningful patterns, or simply a part of the wall out of sight from where we currently stand. Down on your knees before the great wall!

I believe this to be false. I am not on the side of UFOs, but I am on the side of the real. The great wall is not complete. In fact it's not even a wall. The great wall worshipped by the sceptics is made of shifting tissue; holes gape in it, and what lies on the other side is . . . well, that's the real.

As I write this I am reminded of the great Kiwi scientist Ernest Rutherford's famous gold foil experiment. Rutherford was based at the Cavendish labs in Cambridge at the time, fiddling around with the early steam-punk ancestors of today's particle accelerators. In 1909 the accepted model of atomic structure was the plum pudding model, so named by the English physicist J.J. Thomson, who'd made his name a few years earlier as the discoverer of the electron. In Thomson's delectable plum pudding model, the atom was made up of electrons (the plums) embedded in a cloud of positive charge (the pudding). If nothing else, this culinary-flavoured model was a sure sign that physics was dominated in those days by European men who came home after a long day in the lab to enjoy their wives' cooking (except for Madame Curie, of course, who found out about cooking with radioactivity the hard way).

Rutherford's plan was to shoot positively charged alpha particles (two protons and two neutrons bound together – by any other measure, a helium nucleus) at a thin film of gold foil. What Rutherford expected to see was the alpha particles pass through the foil of gold atoms with only very small deviations in their trajectory, which he hoped would show him what kind of a structure the gold atoms were arranged in. What happened instead was that, although most of the alpha particles passed through the foil as expected, some, most astonishingly, *bounced right back*.

According to the plum pudding model, this behaviour was quite impossible. Rutherford recorded his shock in what has become one of the most famous quotes in the history of science, which in my younger days inspired me to study physics as an act of defiance against the accepted and the mundane. 'It was quite the most incredible event that has ever happened to me in my life,' he begins.

> It was almost as incredible as if you fired a 15-inch shell at a piece of tissue paper and it came back and hit you. On consideration, I realized that this scattering backward must be the result of a single collision, and when I made calculations I saw that it was impossible to get anything of that order of magnitude unless you took a system in which the greater part of the mass of the atom was concentrated in a minute nucleus. It was then that I had the idea of an atom with a minute massive centre, carrying a charge.

Rutherford had made a bona fide scientific discovery. Two years later he wrote up his findings in the 1911 paper that is still considered the starting point of nuclear physics. Before his experiment, we simply didn't know that atoms had a nucleus.

Rutherford's 'discovery' of the nucleus led to the development of the solar system model of the atom, where electrons spin

around the nucleus in tight little orbits like planets around the Sun. But then this model was superseded not long afterwards by Danish physicist Niels Bohr's shell model, where electrons rest in concentric energy levels surrounding the nucleus. With the advent of quantum physics in the 1930s, the atom became yet more insubstantial still, existing most fully in mathematical equations that expressed probabilities and wavefront interactions rather than collisions, orbits and particles.

This doesn't mean that the atom ceased to exist, or that quantum physics opens doors to other dimensions (as some fringe sciences, ufology among them, would like to believe). Simply looking behind the veil of existence as we know it will not necessarily reveal a hitherto unknown realm of existence. My point is that when the alpha particle bounced back at Rutherford, it brought with it an unexpected answer that jolted him in search of a question – what *is* the real structure of the atom?

I don't want to overdraw the analogy between Rutherford's gold foil experiment and ufology's search for hard extraterrestrial evidence. Don't listen so much to what ufology says, as what it wishes for. Which is this, the only dictum of high strangeness worth writing down: *This is not everything there is.*

That's what I strive to defend. I take the side of the real and what it gives us, and for that reason I celebrate the existence of ufology without believing a word of it. And yet I accept without reservation sceptics' explanations that Venus is the source for many mistaken UFO sightings, and that people want to believe in aliens more than aliens want to believe in us – these are the logical and I think true assessments of ufology's claims.

But so what? All that's left then is a blank wall. I refuse to defend ufologists, but when a witness says they saw something they can't explain, I think that's the first sign of truth. As long as we can look up into the blue of the sky and see the clouds

and the birds and the sun giving life to us all and, above all this, above the world and beyond the tissue-thin wall of reality, a blurred and indistinct blot appears in the corner of the photo, saying nothing but pointing to the uncertain existence of realms as yet unknown – as long as this is possible, I am satisfied that UFOs are and always have been real, even if they don't exist.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Clare Forster, Louise Thurtell, Jude McGee, Joanne Holliman, Vanessa Pellatt, Michael Wall, Simon Clews, Jane Hawtin, Emily Booth, Ken 'Geldof', Peter 'Octavian', Dave, Asco, George, 'Elsa' and 'Jose', Alejandro, 'Doña Maura', 'Ulises', 'Ricardo', 'Jorge' and 'Catarina', 'Bob', Luke, Xavier, Sam, Martijn, VUFORS, International UFO Museum and Research Center, the DLU, the Rowden White Library, Rue Bebélons, the Royal Children's Hospital.